

## CHAPTER ONE: GENERAL INTRODUCTION

### 1.0 Introduction

This study is concerned with the investigation of how cultural factors affect the production and interpretation of meaning in the African dramatic text. While the study will to some extent be concerned with the semantic qualities of the dramatic text, it is however more concerned with the semiotic aspects. The study is also concerned with exploring the relationship between the texts to be analysed.

### 1.1 Nature of Semiotics

Semiotics is not the same as semantics, which can be considered as only a form of semiotics. While semantics is more concerned with the meaning of words in various contexts (such as phrases, clauses, sentences and paragraphs), semiotics is concerned with all forms of meaning-related signs which are both verbal and non-verbal. Thus, for example, while Lyons (1981: 136) defines semantics as ‘the study of meaning’, it is clear that he is talking of meaning only as it relates to words. The Oxford Dictionary of Current English is more specific, defining semantics as ‘the branch of linguistics concerned with the meaning of words’ (2006: 823), whereas Webster’s Universal English Dictionary says semantics is ‘the study of word meanings and changes’ (2006: 256).

On the other hand, semiotics, as Broms and Kaufmann (1988) state, is concerned with sign systems used in human society, and in this regard words are just one of the means by which a sign system manifests itself. Words are what make up a language, which is, in effect, a system of symbols, or, as Chishimba (2009: 1) states, ‘the expression of thought and emotion by means of words’.

Cobley and Hansz (1997: 4) define semiotics as ‘the analysis of signs or the study of the functioning of sign systems’. They explain that the word ‘semiotics’ comes from the Greek ‘semeion’, as in ‘semeiotikos’, an interpreter of sign systems. Solomon (1988: 9-10) makes this distinction between semantics and semiotics:

Both sciences are devoted to the study of meaning, but the latter explores only the linguistic significance of word-signs, while the former delves into their social and political significance. Semantics are concerned only with words. Semioticians are concerned with us, and though they do analyze words, their analyses also explore the ways that clothes, buildings, TV programs, toys, food, and other ordinary objects are signs of hidden cultural interests.

Signs are central to the study of semiotics, and they are inexhaustible and unpredictable. In other words, anything can be a sign, depending on the context. This fact is well-illustrated by Clarke's definition of a sign as 'any object of interpretation, a thing or event that has significance for some interpreter' (1990: 1).

One of the issues we shall explore is that 'significance' in this regard is determined by the interpreter, who is largely influenced by cultural inclination. Our view is that what may be significant to a person from one culture might not be significant to a person from a different culture. Further, it is our view that the interpretation of the sign will inevitably be influenced by the interpreter's cultural orientation.

Thus, we shall attempt to show that no sign has a fixed meaning. A sign may mean one thing in one culture and quite a different thing in another. On the other hand, signs may change their meaning over time even within the same culture, in the same way that words do. The English language, for example, 'is full of words which have changed their meaning slightly or even dramatically over the centuries' (Bauer and Trudgill 1998: 2).

## **1.2 Origin and Development of Semiotics**

The word 'semiotics' has Greek origins, as do the early precursors of semiotics. Thus, according to Copley and Jansz (1997), Plato (c.428-348), in his work *Cratylus*, ponders the origin of language. They add that Aristotle (c.384-322), in his seminal works *The Poetics* and *On Interpretation*, discusses the meaning of words, especially in relation to his concept of imitation or mimesis.

In *The Poetics* Aristotle says of imitation:

For it is possible to present an imitation of the same object through the same medium in one of three ways: (1) one may tell the story, now directly in person and now through some assumed character, as Homer does; or (2) one may set forth the entire imitation without any change in person; or (3) one may have the characters being portrayed execute the entire imitation. Imitations, then... differ from each other in three respects: in the objects imitated; in the means used; and in the manner of presentation. As an imitation artist, then, Sophocles would be like Homer in that each portrays good men, but also like Aristophanes in that both he and Aristophanes portray men in action and doing things. Indeed, some claim that drama took its name from the fact that it imitated men as they were doing things (Epps 1972: 4).

*The Poetics* also comments on the concept of recognition through signs (Epps 31):

Now a word about the different kinds of recognition. The first, which is the most inartistic but most frequently used by the poets [dramatists] because of their lack of inventiveness, is recognition through signs. Of these, some are marks the characters are born with, such as the 'spearhead which the giants carry' or the kind of stars Carcinus used in his *Thyestes*, while some are acquired.

The term 'semeion' was first used in the fifth century by Parmenides and Hippocrates. The former was a philosopher in ancient Greece, while the latter was a physician. Hippocrates is considered the father of western medicine. Hippocrates used the word 'semeion' to mean clue, proof or symptom. In other words, in order to successfully treat a patient, the physician must first recognise and correctly interpret the signs (that is, symptoms, clues). Hippocrates was not interested in linguistic signs, and maintained that, in order for the physician to read the sign accurately, he needed to take into account 'the air, the water, the environment, the general state of the body, and the regimen which is likely to modify the situation (Eco 1984: 27). Over the centuries semiotics has evolved into a modern science. In modern times, semiotics owes much of its development to the

ideas of two late-nineteenth-century thinkers, Charles Sanders Peirce and Ferdinand de Saussure.

Peirce was a logician and physicist by training who contributed greatly to the inauguration of the science of the sign in America. He is credited with coining the term 'semiotics' (Solomon 1988: 14). Although Saussure, a Swiss linguist and psychologist based in Europe, called his science 'semiology', the two men developed ideas of striking similarity.

Together Peirce and Saussure established the foundation for the fundamental semiotic conviction that the meaning of a sign is not to be found in the object to which it appears to refer but in a concept that functions within a culturally constituted system. For Saussure, the 'signified' (or meaning) referred to by the 'signifier' dog, for instance, is not a flesh-and-blood animal but a concept that can be distinguished from our concepts of, say, foxes, wolves, and even cats. The meaning of each concept – dog, wolf, cat – lies in its difference from every other concept in the system of English-language classification. Thus, a wolf is a wild, doglike animal that is neither a dog nor a fox, and a fox is a wild, doglike animal that is neither a dog nor a wolf. In each case, the semiotic definition of the concept lies not in some biological entity but in the coils of a conceptual system (Solomon 14-15).

Semiotics is not a 'discipline' confined to drama or any particular field of study. It is not a 'method' either, as Elam observes, but 'a multidisciplinary science whose precise methodological characteristics will necessarily vary from field to field but which is united by a common global concern, the better understanding of our own meaning-bearing behaviour' (Elam 1980: 1).

In other words, semiotics can be applied to any field of study, including medicine, football, language, and road signs, for example. The application of semiotic analysis to these fields cannot be uniform by virtue of the fact that each field generates its own unique signs. For example, in his book *Film Language: The Semiotics of the Cinema*,

Metz applies semiotics to the narrative of film. He classifies the narrative of the film as the signifier, and the 'thing told', or story itself, as the signified (quoted in Genette 1980: 33).

Hence, the semiotics of drama is unique to drama, and cannot be applied effectively in any other field. Thus, despite the close relationship between the dramatic text and the performance, or between drama and theatre, the two cannot be subjected to exactly the same semiotic tools of analysis. The two, though sharing similarities, are different, as Elam notes in his major work, *The Semiotics of Theatre and Drama* (1980: 2):

'Theatre' is taken to refer here to the complex of phenomena associated with the performer-audience transaction: that is, with the production and communication of meaning in the performance itself and with the systems underlying it. By 'drama', on the other hand, is meant that mode of fiction designed for stage representation and constructed according to particular ('dramatic') conventions. The epithet 'theatrical', then, is limited to what takes place between and among performers and spectators, while the epithet 'dramatic' indicates the network of factors relating to the represented fiction.

The book distinguishes between the semiotics of the theatre and the semiotics of drama, although it does acknowledge the debate over 'whether a semiotics of theatre *and* drama is conceivable as a bi- or multilateral but nevertheless integrated enterprise, or whether instead there are necessarily two (or more) quite separate disciplines in play' (3). Thus, this study is only concerned with the relationship between the reader and the playwright, not between the actor and the audience.

### **1.3 Semiotics and Contemporary African Drama**

This study is concerned specifically with the semiotics of African drama and how it is influenced by cultural factors. In this study, drama refers to the dramatic text or play text before it is performed. This is contrasted with theatre, which in this study refers to the performance.

The study recognises the fact that the signs of the dramatic text are transformable. In other words, the meaning of the signs of a dramatic text can be transformed when the text is performed, depending largely on the cultural context in which the performance takes place. Thus, the study will not extend to the signs of the performance. All the sign-vehicles of the dramatic text are central to this study, including words, stage directions, scene descriptions, character descriptions and costume, props, symbols, metaphors, *inter alia*.

The study will be based on four main contemporary African dramatic texts by four different playwrights: 'The Dilemma of a Ghost' (Christina Ama Ata Aidoo, Ghana), 'The Black Mamba Two' (Kabwe Kasoma, Zambia), 'The Black Hermit' (Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Kenya), and 'Nothing but the Truth' (John Kani, South Africa).

The fact that the texts under study are all written in English does not mean anyone who speaks English would easily understand everything about them, especially with regard to the meaning of words and actions in the texts. This is because of the cultural factor. This study proceeds from the premise that the playtext is a form of communication to the reader or audience. However, as Chen and Starosta (1998: 20) correctly state, culture and communication 'mutually influence each other'.

Since dramatists are influenced by the cultures in which they grow up, or where they live, each playtext poses challenges in terms of interpretation of words and actions as well as determination of meaning by the reader or audience. Quite often the dramatist and the reader are associated with different cultural discourses. Thus, for example, a Zambian reading a play by Shakespeare will face some challenges when it comes to the culture-related aspects of the play such as the language, customs and beliefs of the time.

This problem of interpretation also applies even in cases where a Zambian reads the work of another African, because, while African cultures have some common features, they also have major differences. A Zambian reader could have trouble interpreting the culture-specific signs even of a work written by a Zimbabwean, despite the geographical

proximity. Hence this study places a high premium on how cultural factors influence both the creation and interpretation of meaning.

In analysing the four texts, therefore, the study recognises the fact that it would be naïve and misleading to simply place the texts under one bracket such as ‘African culture’. Granted, some cultural factors might be common to all or most Africans, but that does not mean Africans have a homogenous culture. Excepting the commonalities, cultures differ from country to country. In addition, no country has a homogenous culture because, at least in Africa, the various ethnic groups have their own unique cultural practices and norms.

Several criteria were used in choosing the four texts. First, all of them fit the description of contemporary African drama. Second, all the plays are written by African dramatists. Third, the plays are all written in English, although some do exhibit elements of using some expressions or words in African languages. The fourth criterion is that the texts deal with African themes and situations which are largely peculiar to Africa, or are at least relevant to the African experience. Thus, for example, while ‘The Dilemma of a Ghost’ and ‘The Black Hermit’ generally deal with cultural conflict, ‘The Black Mamba II’ and ‘Nothing but the Truth’ deal with historical issues. The only difference, however, is that while the former is based on actual historical events related to Zambia’s struggle against colonialism, the latter deals with some of the challenges created by apartheid in South Africa.

An effort was made to ensure that the plays are not from only one geographical area of Africa. They are from East Africa (‘The Black Hermit’), West Africa (‘The Dilemma of a Ghost’), and Southern Africa (‘The Black Mamba II’ and ‘Nothing but the Truth’). This study recognises the fact that, despite being African, the writers all come from different cultural backgrounds. This fact in itself provides the necessary variety and depth to the study. Ultimately, however, the study seeks to identify common semiotic characteristics among the texts, as well as the key semiotic differences. The study seeks to identify common trends among the texts as well as common factors that constitute some rules or

principles which could be applied to the semiotic reading of modern African dramatic texts.

## **2.0 Statement of the Problem**

The significance of culture as a factor in semiotisation as well as interpretation of sign-vehicles of the dramatic text cannot be over-emphasised. Culture and cultural bias or orientation have historically contributed to the way people of one culture interpret or judge works of art from other cultures, especially where the cultures are significantly different. This is because culture conditions our perceptions of reality (Chen and Starosta 1998: 20). Playwrights do not write in a cultural vacuum. A playwright's nature and experience is to a large extent culture-related.

Hence playwrights cannot be divorced from the cultural milieu within which they write any more than their play can be divorced from its cultural context. Bentley argues that Shakespeare's plays 'prove that he had studied and absorbed the whole culture of his day' (1968: 171). It is therefore important to know something about a playtext's cultural context and connections if one is to accurately interpret its sign-vehicles. This also means that one has to put aside one's own cultural baggage when reading a text from a different culture.

Oftentimes, however, cultural bias and orientation influence the way people read or interpret dramatic texts and performance texts. Cultural bias and orientation are largely responsible for the negative attitude of Western theatre practitioners and critics toward African theatre and drama. Irobi (2006: 271) states that the tendency by European scholars to label African art forms as primitive is due largely to lack of knowledge of African cultural norms and aesthetics. Wole Soyinka lends weight to this view:

When you go into any culture... you have to go with humility. You have to understand the language, and by that I do not mean what we speak, you've got to understand the language, the interior language of the people. You've got to be able to study their philosophy... their world view. You've got to speak both the language and the metalanguage of the people (Irobi: 271).

Zambian theatre history provides a classic example of how cultural baggage can influence one's attitude to and interpretation of a play. In 1970, UNZADRAMS (University of Zambia Dramatic Society) participated in a theatre festival organised by the Theatre Association of Zambia (TAZ), which was controlled by the European settler community and European expatriates. UNZADRAMS entered Kabwe Kasoma's play *Fools Marry* in the festival. However, according to Mwansa (1999: 65) a serious confrontation developed between UNZADRAMS and the British adjudicator who misinterpreted the play because he 'failed to understand the cultural content'. The adjudicator did not understand what was meant by women 'going to the moon'.

The following year, UNZADRAMS found themselves in another confrontation with the British adjudicator at the TAZ festival, in which they participated with the play *Kazembe and the Portuguese*. David Pownall, the adjudicator, was critical of UNZADRAMS and Chikwakwa Theatre. This led to UNZADRAMS' withdrawal from TAZ as they were of the view that the organisation wanted them to participate only as a way of legitimising the festival (Mwansa 190).

The problem under investigation in this study therefore is: *How does the interaction between semiotics and culture affect the production and interpretation of meaning in the contemporary African dramatic text?*

### **3.0 Purpose of the Study**

#### **3.1 General**

To establish how cultural factors influence the production and interpretation of meaning in the modern African dramatic text, particularly the four texts written by Christina Ama Ata Aidoo (*The Dilemma of a Ghost*), Kabwe Kasoma (*The Black Mamba II*), Ngugi wa Thiong'o (*The Black Hermit*), and John Kani (*Nothing but the Truth*).

### **3.2 Objectives**

The study seeks to achieve five key objectives:

- (i) to explore the relationship between the signifier and the signified in the dramatic text;
- (ii) to establish how cultural factors influence the creation and interpretation of meaning in a dramatic text;
- (iii) to establish the relationship between culture and sign-vehicles of a dramatic text;
- (iv) to explore the behaviour of sign-vehicles in the dramatic text;
- (v) to identify common trends of sign-vehicles in the four texts under study;

### **3.3 Research Questions**

The proposed study will attempt to answer eight specific questions in relation to the objectives above:

- (i) How does the relationship between the signifier and signified affect meaning?
- (ii) To what extent does the relationship between semiotics and African culture influence the creation and interpretation of meaning in a dramatic text?
- (iii) Are the sign-vehicles of the African dramatic text uniquely African?
- (iv) What is the relationship between cultural authenticity and the semiotisation of the dramatic text?
- (v) Are there any common semiotic trends among contemporary African dramatic texts?

### **4.0 Hypotheses**

The study is largely guided by the following hypotheses:

- (i) The dramatic text is different from the performance text;
- (ii) The dramatic text is a form of communication from the dramatist to the reader;
- (iii) The production and interpretation of meaning in a dramatic text is largely influenced by cultural factors;

- (iv) The dramatic text exhibits two main types of communication. First, between the text (or playwright) and the reader (audience). Two, between the characters within the text;
- (v) Communication is both verbal and non-verbal;
- (vi) The reader's cultural orientation, as well as the extent to which they know the playwright's culture, can either enable them to make a correct or erroneous interpretation of the meaning of a text or aspects of it;
- (vii) Contemporary African dramatic texts are characteristically a blend of African and western conventions;
- (viii) To understand a contemporary African play, one must have some degree of understanding of the culture in which it is produced.

## **5.0 Significance of the Study**

Compared to European and American theatre, not much has been written about African theatre. Similarly, few African dramatic texts have been published, let alone studied at national or international level. Few African playwrights have had their plays studied by scholars or in universities. This study will therefore add to the body of material written on African drama. In addition, the study is unique because there is no publication on the influence of culture on the semiotics of African drama. In fact, no comprehensive study has been done on the semiotics of African drama.

There has been little written on the semiotics of the dramatic text, with most works concentrating on the semiotic processes associated with the performance. With regard to the African context, however, there is no major work focusing solely on analysing the semiotic processes associated with the African dramatic text. Most of the works use general dramatic theory to analyse plays, but there is almost nothing specifically dealing with African dramatic texts as semiotic products. This study will therefore provide some general guidelines which could be applied to the analysis and interpretation of African dramatic texts.

## **6.0 Theoretical Framework**

This study is largely guided by the theoretical framework governing the study of semiotics, in particular the semiotics of drama. Under this framework, a distinction is made between the semiotics of theatre and the semiotics of drama, based on the premise that drama is different from theatre in the sense that, while the former is concerned with the dramatic text, or play text, the latter is concerned with the performance or the performance text. As Keir Elam (2002) demonstrates, signs or sign-vehicles are important to the understanding of the dramatic text. However, the theoretical framework is handled in greater detail in Chapter Three of the study.

## **7.0 Methodology**

### **7.1 General**

The study applies the qualitative approach. It focuses on a limited and predetermined number of carefully selected texts.

### **7.2 Delimitations of the Study**

A deliberate attempt was made to ensure that the plays and playwrights are from various parts of Africa. Thus, while Ngugi is East African (Kenya), Aidoo (Ghana) is West African. On the other hand, Kasoma (Zambia) and Kani (South Africa) are both southern African dramatists. The study recognises the fact that the four are by no means the only playwrights worth studying; neither are their plays necessarily the best in Africa. The four were chosen partly because of space considerations as well as the need for the analysis to be focused.

While acknowledging that there are a lot of modern African plays written in African languages as well as other colonial languages such as Portuguese and French, the study confines itself to plays written in English. This is in part because of the obvious reason that the author would like to narrow the focus to a language which many readers would understand. The study also avoids using translated texts because doing so would make the analysis more complicated and unfocused.

### **7.3 Data Analysis**

Data was collected by an intensive study of the main texts in relation to other texts, within the context of the theoretical and conceptual framework of the study. The data was analysed in relation to the objectives of the study followed by identification, description, explanation and interpretation of the emerging themes, patterns and/or common features.

### **8.0 Conclusion**

This chapter lays a foundation for the rest of the chapters. It has established the significance, purpose and parameters of the study, as well as the factors guiding it. It has outlined the specific objectives which the study is expected to achieve, as well as the research questions which the study intends to answer. The next chapter reviews the literature associated with the study.

## CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

### 1.0 Introduction

The previous chapter was concerned with introducing the study's areas of concern as well as what it is intended to achieve. In order to place the study in a historical context, however, it is necessary to review the literature already available on the subject of study. That is the focus of this chapter.

### 2.0 Literature Review

The question of whether it is the dramatic text that precedes the performance, or whether it is the performance that precedes or leads to the dramatic text, has preoccupied scholars for a long time. One school of thought is of the view that it is the performance that precedes the play text, largely on the basis of the fact that performance had non-literary origins.

In *Ancient and Medieval Theatre*, for example, Vince (1984: 3) argues that to insist that the text precedes the performance is to deny the primitive origins of drama. Another school of thought, on the other hand, argues that the performance text depends on and is determined by the contents of the dramatic text. Therefore, the dramatic text can be studied apart from the performance, although there is a relationship between the dramatic text and the performance. The semiotics of drama and the semiotics of theatre are therefore interrelated. Theatre and drama have their own sign systems whose meaning is important to the understanding of a piece of theatre or drama.

In *A History of Theatre*, Wickham argues that theatre is 'a language, coupling verbal with visual images, which assists humanity to understand itself' (1985: 12). If the dramatic text precedes the performance text, then it may be argued that the 'verbal' and 'visual' images, or signs, are 'represented' by what is written in the dramatic text. McGrath (1996: 4-5) states that the dramatic text also has its 'language', which is the 'words on the page'.

There is a difference between theatre and drama, and between the dramatic text and the performance text. In this context, drama refers to the written text of the play before it is performed, or the dramatic text, also referred to as the playtext (Mick Wallis 2002: 2). Drama is therefore that form of theatrical expression that is created primarily as a literary artifact (Heuvel, 1991: 2-3). The dramatic text may be studied as dramatic literature, without any reference to its performance. Once the playtext is performed, however, it is transformed from a piece of drama into a theatrical piece, or performance text. Another term for it is theatrical text. There is therefore a gap between the dramatic text and the theatrical text, and this can affect meaning, depending on the interpretation of the director or audience. Wilson lends weight to this view when he argues: 'There is nothing to stop an audience or critic from seeing more in a play than the author intended or was conscious of at the time of writing' (1985: 13).

It is possible, therefore, that, depending on a variety of factors such as the director's directional decisions, the costume, movement, pauses, poses, gestures, facial expressions, space utilisation of the actors, or even the design and content of the stage set, the meaning of the dramatic text can either be enhanced or altered during a performance. As Sanger argues, 'the text is "re-written" with each performance or direction' (2001: 1). There is a further gap between the sign and what it may mean, depending on the context. This is due to the process of 'semiotisation' of the object or sign. Semiotics distinguishes between the object (or signifier) and its meaning (or signified). Thus, for example, depending on the cultural or physical context, a table may signify a dinner table or an office, or even a classroom in a school. It could even serve as a bus or house because signs are transformable.

Semiotics is the study of how meaning is produced and conveyed. Keir Elam (2002: 1) defines semiotics as 'a science dedicated to the study of the production of meaning in society'. It has its roots in the structuralism of Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure, who 'developed a systematic approach to the description of language as a self-contained system' (Booker 1996: 57) and the Prague school of structuralists (Elam 2002: 2).

The structuralists, along with American Charles Sanders Peirce, argued that meaning was conveyed by signs and sign systems, hence the alternative definition of semiotics as the science of signs. While the early structuralists studied the sign in the context of linguistics, the Prague school scholars were the first to study the signs in the context of theatre. They were interested in the production of meaning in the context of theatre performance. In other words, their focus was the study of the signs involved in the production of meaning during the performance, or what is sometimes referred to as the performance text.

Yet the production, conveyance and interpretation of meaning cannot be divorced from cultural influences and context. Both the dramatic and the theatrical text cannot be detached from, or studied apart from, the context of the culture in which they are produced because no playwright writes from a deculturalised or 'culture-less' context. Writers are influenced, consciously or unconsciously, by the culture in which they grow up, or with which they interact. Bentley (1968: 168) says a work of art 'springs from its author's nature', adding that 'all art is a crystallisation of personal experience and second-hand experience' (p177).

In drama, as in theatre, 'the cultural context is important' (Wilson, 1985: 103). The cultural factor affects, not only the meaning of the sign, but also the interpretation of the sign. When a Japanese businessman nods his head in a ritual bow and smiles, it might be interpreted as a sign of great humility, yet it does not necessarily signify humility in the Japanese cultural context. (Wilson 1985: 103) Prentki and Selman (2000: 54) show the significance of context when they argue against the notion of a 'universal theatre'. They state that there is no such thing as a theatre which will affect one and all in the same way, or which will mean the same to all people regardless of their cultural background or status in life.

The notion of universal theatre, they argue, 'flies out the window when one begins with *context*'. They add: 'As the context changes, so the codes and short hands one can use vary/change, be they theatrical coding or subject/content specific coding. So *context* will

certainly impact *content*' (2000: 54). The content, in turn, will impact and determine the signs. African dramatists, though largely following western conventions of playwriting, are also influenced, to various degrees, by traditional African performing arts. Obafemi (Breitinger, ed., 2003: 38) states that any modern African dramatic performance adapts, exploits and appropriates residual oral traditional forms and content.

The dramatic text is also a form of communication since, as Chen and Starosta (1998) say, communication is a mutually dependent relationship in which the participants exchange symbols. The signs of the communication process are symbols – they represent something else which the reader or recipient of the sign needs to understand or be familiar with in order to accurately interpret the meaning of the symbol. In this regard words are also symbols. Communication is a critical part of the human experience because it is involved in every aspect of our lives from the day of our birth to the day of our death, and for each second of every day we spend in life (Stewart, Lanham, Zimmer, Clark and Stead 1978). There is therefore need for us to understand what communication is all about and what happens when people communicate.

Kaul (2007) argues in the book *Business Communication* that communication is not merely an understanding of the spoken words, but also the symbols and the gestures that accompany the spoken words. He further argues that communication is never a one-way process, but rather a two-way process in which the interactants are fully involved. Kaul (2007) also dwells on the importance of signs, proceeding from the argument that a sign is something physical which can be perceived by our senses. He adds that our interpretation of the sign depends largely on our perception.

Clarke (1990: 1) defines a sign as 'any object of interpretation, a thing or event that has significance for some interpreter', adding that the sign 'can stand for some object for this interpreter, signify an action to be performed, arouse in the interpreter a feeling or emotion, or combine two or more of these functions'. In his work *Principles of Semiotic* (1987: 12), Clarke provides some etymological data on the sign. According to him, the Greek term for sign was '*to semeion*' (plural, '*ta semeia*'). The term eventually led to the

evolution of another Greek term '*semiotikos*', which means an observant of signs, or one who interprets or divines their meaning. It is from this word that the English word 'semiotics' was derived. Hence Lucid, in his translation of the anthology *Soviet Semiotics*, defines semiotics as 'the science of signs' (1977: 1) Signs, therefore, are central to the determination of meaning in communication.

Nobre draws our attention to the difference between semantics and semiotics, although both are concerned with meaning:

How meaning is carried in words is the business of semantics, a part of linguistics. Semiotics deals with meaning conveyed by any medium, not only speech, and semiotic properties are those properties from which meaning is created. Semantics is therefore one aspect of semiotics – semantic properties are those properties that belong to speech. But speech has not only semantic properties. A sentence may be long; it may contain seventy words, twenty of which are monosyllabic. These are not semantic properties per se, though they may, in some unusual circumstances, contribute to semantic properties i.e., to the meaning of the sentence, especially when that is intended to be the case (1986: 22).

Chen and Starosta (1998) argue that communication includes four components. First, the holistic phenomenon. Second, the social reality. Third, the developmental process. Fourth, the orderly process.

By holistic phenomenon is meant the idea that interactants belong to a whole in which they cannot be understood without reference to each other and to the whole system. By system is meant the cultural and social system of which the two are a part and which they have experienced. Chen and Starosta add that 'communication is itself a network of relations that gives interactants an identity by granting them unique qualities or characteristics' (1998: 21). In order to understand the interactants in any form of communication, therefore, we need first of all to understand their network of relations. Similarly, we cannot understand the network of relations unless we understand the interactants.

As a social reality, communication is only made possible because people collectively agree that the social phenomena associated with communication actually exist. In other words, people are able to communicate only on the basis of common meanings and symbols they collectively attach to verbal and non-verbal forms of behaviour. The attached meanings and symbols, therefore, only make sense in a social context, and can be transformed to mean or symbolise different things depending on the context. The social context also includes factors such as the nature of the relationship between the interactants and their cultural baggage, both individual and collective. Hence Kaul (2007) argues that ‘despite the fact that meaning is associated with words, there is a variation in association of meaning in different contexts’ (19).

Chen and Starosta (1998) emphasise the importance of cultural baggage in the interpretation of messages. They argue that human beings are programmed by their culture to do what they do and to be what they are: ‘Culture is the software of the human mind that provides an operating environment for human behaviors. Although individual behaviors may be varied, all members within the same operating environment share important characteristics of the culture’ (25).

Chen and Starosta argue that human beings are destined to carry their cultural baggage whenever and wherever they go. They acknowledge that, as a consequence, the ‘potential for miscommunication and disagreement is great because of cultural differences’ (28). Culture and communication, they further argue, ‘act on each other. As the carrier of culture, communication influences the structure of culture, and culture is necessarily manifested in our communication patterns by teaching us how we should talk and behave’ (29).

Kaul (2007: 15) highlights other factors that are associated with the ‘potential for miscommunication’, and these include psychological and physical barriers:

Mental turbulence of any kind which distracts the interactant or prevents him from paying attention to the spoken content is defined as psychological noise. It

could be due to a host of reasons – preoccupation, ego hang-ups, anxiety, fatigue, pre-conceived ideas and notions, etc. Sounds related to physical disturbances and distractions either in the surrounding environment or somewhere close by which perforce draw the attention of the interactants, can be termed as physical noise. Understanding and then trying to minimise the element of noise is extremely important in any kind of communication. These distracting elements, be they psychological or physical, can convolute the entire process of communication and lead to miscommunication or ineffective communication.

Kaul further postulates that barriers to communication can be erected either consciously or unconsciously by either the sender or receiver of the message, or by both interactants. When this happens, he argues, communication fails and it is devalued to a mere conversation where feedback is not expected (20).

Kaul (21) adds that barriers to communication can include: loss in impact, ineffective grasp of message, dichotomy in reception and comprehension, partial grasp of topic, distancing from the speaker, lack of interest, mental turbulence, misunderstanding, groping for the right message, superior attitude, biased listening, lack of collaborative effort, mental block, and lack of provision of correct feedback.

Kaul also includes prejudice among the barriers of communication (24):

Starting on a prejudiced premise can have negative repercussions on the entire course of interaction.... Prejudice either against the speaker or his ideas, in the initial phases, erects barriers which are difficult to remove, at least during the course of communication. The first thing which needs to be done is to remove bias or prejudice, if it exists, for communication to be effective and efficient.

However, as Chen and Starosta (1998) argue, there is a link between prejudice and cultural orientation, because prejudice is largely caused by one's perception of an issue or event: 'Since the way we behave is dictated by the way we perceive the world, it is important for us to understand the nature of perception and how our perception depends on our cultural experiences' (33). They define prejudice as 'a learned tendency by which

we respond to a given group of people or event in a consistent (usually negative) way' (41).

Chen and Starosta further state (35):

Although our physical makeup and social roles affect the way we perceive external stimuli, both are essentially conditioned by our culture.... a person's culture has a strong impact on the perception process. Culture not only provides the foundation for the meanings we give to our perceptions, it also directs us to word specific kinds of messages and events.

Bate (2002: 78-9) holds a similar view:

By perception we mean the ability of an event to touch us so that we feel it. An event becomes experience only when it touches us. Perception involves a meeting between the event and human persons. There are many events in the world which are not experiences for us.... The process of perception, then, is concerned with what happens when an event touches us or enters into our world. We may feel it, see it, touch it, hear it, or smell it. We may read of it or be told about it second-hand as it were but somehow the event enters our world and thus we begin to perceive it. As it enters our world a relationship is set up between us and the event. There is a reciprocity between subject and object. Now people from different societies and cultures often perceive the same outside event in different ways. In other words people coming from different cultures may not experience the same event in the same way. An eclipse of the sun might be a natural event for one group of people or a warning from God for another. Every event becomes a human experience firstly through the process of perception. This process controls the direction in which the event will be experienced.

Bate gives some interesting examples of how perception is determined by cultural orientation or experience.

A person takes hold of an instrument which looks like a knife and begins to cut the flesh of another person who is lying in front of him. What is happening? In a Western culture this could be perceived as a stabbing or perhaps as a surgical

operation. In some traditional African cultures this event could be perceived as a ritual incision as part of the clan tradition (80).

Bate gives another example concerning how different cultures perceive the experience of being looked straight in the eye: 'In most African cultures this is considered quite disrespectful especially when the one being addressed is older or of higher status. Yet in the Western culture this is a sign of honesty, and someone who keeps looking away whilst speaking would be thought of as shifty eyed and dishonest' (81).

Bate concludes thus: 'Our culture, our experience and even our mood all affect our perception. The role of culture here however is very important since the framework within which we make sense of our world is called culture' (81). In highlighting the link between culture and language, Bate explains that while in Zulu there is only one word for snow (*iqhwa*) because to the Zulu people snow has no cultural significance, in Inuit language of Canada, where it snows for more than six months of the year there are many words for snow (83). On the other hand, Bate argues, the Zulu language has about 500 words for walking because walking is culturally significant among the Zulu. By contrast English has fewer words for walking (82). However, in *Semiotics of Language and Culture* (Fawcett, Halliday, Lamb and Makkai, 1984), Lamb argues that there is a link between one's physical makeup and cultural orientation:

All people walk, but Chinese people walk differently from Americans. All people use facial expressions and hand gestures, but those of Italians are different from those of the English. As with perception, it appears that each culture imposes a certain distinctiveness upon systems having general properties given by the biological structure of human beings (95).

Despite their views on the role of culture in communication, Chen and Starosta acknowledge, as do most other scholars, that there is no one universally acceptable definition of culture. While noting the definition of culture by E. B. Tylor (1967) as 'a complex whole of our social traditions and [a] prerequisite for us to be a member of the society', Chen and Starosta have their own view of culture:

Culture can be a set of fundamental ideas, practices, and experiences of a group of people that are symbolically transmitted generation to generation through a learning process. Culture may as well refer to beliefs, norms, and attitudes that are used to guide our behaviors and to solve human problems. Moreover, we can look at culture from an interpretive and performance perspective by viewing it as a system of expressive practices and mutual meanings associated with our behaviors (25-6).

On the other hand, the *Oxford Dictionary of Current English* gives the following as one of the definitions of culture: ‘The arts, customs, ideas, etc. of a nation, people, or group’ (2006: 213) This definition differs slightly from that of Webster’s Universal English Dictionary (2006) which defines culture thus: ‘The entire range of customs, beliefs, social forms, and material traits of a religious, social, or racial group’ (76).

By implication, therefore, people with different cultural backgrounds have different customs, ideas, beliefs and traits. This means different people might assign different interpretations and meanings to the same object or action, depending on their cultural background. Chernov’s view (Broms and Kaufmann 1988) lends weight to this assertion:

Culture is understood as a system that stands between man (as social unit) and the reality surrounding him; that is, as a mechanism for processing and organising the information which comes to him from the outside world. The information may be considered important or it may be ignored within a given culture. However, information which is considered non-relevant for one culture may, in the language of another culture, be extremely important (13).

This view has implications for the interpretation of the dramatic text. As Chernov (1998: 13) argues, ‘one and the same text may be read differently in languages of different cultures’. Hence, in semiotics, as Rédei (2007: 51) states, the notion of culture ‘is used as a tool to analyse a meeting of cultures’ because your own culture ‘is usually the culture you understand best and also appreciate the most’.

The 'meeting of cultures' usually, but not exclusively, takes the form of words. Language is therefore critical to any meeting of cultures, be it in real life or in the dramatic text. For as Chishimba (2009: 1)) argues:

Language is the expression of thought and emotion by means of words. These words may be in spoken or written form. Language is the basis of communication between people... When people are conversing, meaning can be transmitted by tone of voice, facial expression or gestures thereby rendering unnecessary a great deal of words and phrases required to make the points in writing.

The 'tone of voice', 'facial expression' and 'gestures' can be, and usually are, culturally driven signs. Conversely, the interpretation of these signs cannot be done without cultural influences. However, the tone of voice, facial expression and gestures merely complement words. Lamb (1984: 96) places language at the heart of cultural identity: 'A culture as a whole may be characterisable as a vast integrated semiotic in which can be recognised a number of subsemiotics, one of which is the language... the language is intricately connected to the rest of the culture...'

According to some scholars, language actually determines culture. They support the 'Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis,' which postulates that language not only transmits but also shapes our thinking, attitudes and beliefs. In this regard language is in effect a guide to culture and, as Sapir argues, it conditions our thinking about social problems and processes (Chen and Starosta, 1998: 71). Each culture, according to Chen and Starosta, 'possesses a unique lexicon and grammar', and for this reason 'no cultural reality can ever be fully explained by members of one culture to those of another' (71).

Chen and Starosta, however, note that some scholars take a different view from that espoused by the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis:

Some scholars feel that Sapir and Whorf exaggerated the role language plays in the human society. Hoijer (1994), for example, pointed out that the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis overemphasizes the linguistic differences that cause communication barriers, arguing instead that no culture can be completely self-contained or isolated. Important similarities exist in the real world (71).

Although language is very critical to the interpretation of culture, it is necessary to recognise that communication is both verbal and nonverbal, as observed by Chen and Starosta (61), who postulate that nonverbal communication ‘involves those humanly and environmentally generated stimuli in a communication setting that convey potential nonlinguistic message values to the interactants’ (83).

Ferdinand de Saussure dichotomised language using the *langue/parole* concept. According to him, *langue* refers to the purely social aspect of language, or a system of communication, while *parole* refers to the purely individual aspect of language (quoted in Anozie 1981: 195). Anozie provides more insight into the dichotomy: ‘*Langue* is an autonomous social institution, a collective contract which constitutes a system of values. *Parole*, by contrast, is essentially an act of individual selection: it prescribes a number of combinations in the use which the individual can make of the code of *langue* to express his thought’ (Anozie 1981: 195).

The interplay between the *langue* and *parole* is important to the interpretation of signs. However, nonverbal language is an equally important factor in communication. Chen and Starosta (1998) include, among forms of nonverbal communication, kinesics (the study of body movements and activities in human communication) or what is better known as body language; proxemics (the study of how human beings and animals use space in the communication process); paralanguage (the study of voice or the use of vocal signs in communication); chronemics (the study of how we use time in communication). Woolcott and Unwin (1983) state that the major elements of non-verbal communication can be divided into space (proxemics), body language (kinesics), vocal tone, the senses and time (1983: 188).

Kaul (2007) refers to body language as ‘body sport’ (79): ‘The non-verbal manifestation of what we wish to convey to the receiver is evidenced in the manner we walk, talk and position our hands... It is a solitary game which knows no rules and over which one has no control – not even the individual who plays it.’ The ‘body sport’, according to Kaul, includes gestures, handshakes, eye contact, facial expression, voice modulations and

styles of walking. He states, for instance, that walking with hands in the pocket might mean (i) that the person concerned intends to portray a macho image with the intention of impressing (especially if it is done on rare occasions and in public); (ii) that the individual is shy, secretive and withdrawn - that is, if it is done as a habit (98).

From the semiotic point of view, therefore, body language constitutes signs which, when correctly interpreted, enable us to understand what the individual is communicating as well as their personality or state of mind. Since characters in dramatic texts also use nonverbal communication, it is important to identify and correctly interpret the signs associated with the nonverbal communication within the text. Clarke Jr (1990: 1) offers a definition for 'sign':

A sign is any object of interpretation, a thing or event that has significance for some interpreter. It can stand for some object for this interpreter, signify an action to be performed, arouse in the interpreter a feeling or emotion, or combine two or more of these functions. Signs include natural events such as odors or sounds in the environments of lower animals, warning cries used in primitive forms of signaling, diagrams and drawings similar in some respects to what they represent, sentences formed according to the grammatical rules of natural languages, and segments of discourse formed by combining sentences.

Bate (2002) defines signs as things which stand for other things and signify a certain reality. Among the signs he includes *words*, which he says represent the idea or concept behind the reality. Johansen agrees with this view, stating that words are 'the prime example of symbolic signs, and languages are predominantly symbolic sign systems' (quoted in Shapiro 2002: 204).

Bate also includes *art forms* which, he argues, 'stand for the reality of some kind of transcendental or emotional cultural experience' (93). He also includes *recreation forms* such as actors in a movie or play who stand for someone else. His list also includes *cultural forms*, by which he means traditions, customs and rituals, among other forms of human behaviour. Even *religious forms* are signs, argues Bate, stating that the Koran, mass, Jesus, the cross and the Bible are good examples (94). In other words, Jesus could

signify anything from godhood to immortality, while the cross could signify the death of Jesus or, as when it is mounted on the roof of a building, a church. The Koran, on the other hand, could signify the Moslem religion or the teachings of the prophet Muhammad.

Barry (1999: 6), on the other hand, includes traffic lights on his list of signs: 'The traffic light signifies its message of "stop" or "go" through a purely arbitrary cultural agreement that red will mean the former and green the latter...' The traffic lights, in other words, signify instructions to the person driving on the road and the pedestrian. The sign, therefore, implies a link between the sign and the object it represents. Husserl supports this view when he states that 'a sign is composed of two joined elements, of which one is experienced to be directly present to the mind without being its theme, the other not being directly present to the mind but being its theme i.e., to which the interest is directed' (quoted by Rébei 2007). Eco (1984: 1), on the other hand, says the sign is 'usually considered as a correlation between a signifier and a signified (or between expression and content) and therefore as an action between pairs'.

Bate's view adds weight to this view: 'The sign has the ability to connect us to the whole experience it signifies. This whole experience comprises two realities. The first of these is the reality or meaning which is signified. This is called the signified.... The second reality is the visible phenomenon which signifies the meaning. This is called the signifier' (94). Hence Sebeok (1991: 2) states that one of the functions of signs is 'signification'. Posner, on the other hand, says of signification: 'Semiosis involves a code (a standard connection between a signifier and a signified), the sign in question is a signifying sign and the resulting process is called signification' which, according to him, 'can occur without senders and addressees, but not without sign messages, signifiers, signifieds, and recipients' (quoted in Broms and Kaufmann 1988: 158). Peirce, on the other hand, defines semiosis as 'an action, or influence, which is, or involves, an operation of three subjects, such as a sign, its object, and its interpretant, this tri-relative influence not being in any way resolvable into an action between pairs' (quoted in Eco 1984: 1).

In order to determine the meaning of a sign, we need to interpret it correctly or accurately. Thus, as Eco says, a sign is 'not only something which stands for something else; it is also something that can and must be interpreted' (46). Anozie (1981: 199), on the other hand, states that while the signifier relates to expression, the signified relates to the content level. In triadic theory of communication, Jakobson argues that any meaningful communication has three discernible levels: the expression (E), the content (C), and the relation between these two (R). The relation E R C then represents a system of signification, that is of relation (quoted in Anozie 201). In order to understand signification, therefore, we need to understand the E-R-C relationship. However, quoting Peirce, Eco states that the principle of interpretation says that 'a sign is something knowing which we know something more' (2). In other words, once we understand the sign, we are better placed to understand what it signifies.

The signs of the playtext, therefore, stand for 'something else' which needs to be identified by the appropriate interpretation of the sign. In this regard then the words, symbols, actions, costumes, setting, props, dialogue, characters, and stage directions of the play can be signs.

### **3.0 Conclusion**

This chapter has endeavoured to highlight the already existing views on the study's areas of concern. This has been achieved by reviewing the relevant literature. This demonstrates the fact that, although the study seeks to generate new information, it cannot detach itself from what has already been written on the field of semiotics and culture. In the next chapter we shall focus on the conceptual and theoretical framework of the study.

## CHAPTER THREE: CONCEPTUAL AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

### 1.0 General Introduction

This chapter postulates the theoretical and conceptual basis for the analysis of the dramatic texts. It discusses the nature, scope and depth of the investigation, whose purpose is to determine the extent to which, and the various means by which, cultural factors influence the production, transmission and interpretation of meaning in the contemporary African dramatic text. The chapter also introduces the various concepts and theories that are critical to the process of analysing the four dramatic texts.

### 2.0 Introduction

This study is concerned with the question of how culture influences the production of meaning in the modern African dramatic text. It is also concerned with how culture influences the interpretation of meaning in the reading of the contemporary African dramatic text. The study, therefore, is largely based on the thesis that culture and semiotics are causally linked – that is, the process of semiotisation is subject to cultural influence.

While contemporary African dramatic texts have been published in a variety of African and foreign languages, this study shall focus on texts written in the English language. The texts that we feel should fall under our immediate concern are:

- (i) *The Black Mamba Two* - Kabwe Kasoma (Zambia)
- (ii) *The Dilemma of a Ghost* – Christina Ama Ata Aidoo (Ghana)
- (iii) *Nothing but the Truth* – John Kani (South Africa)
- (iv) *The Black Hermit* – Ngugi wa Thiong’o (Kenya)

In selecting the texts, we ensured that they are not all from the same country or region of Africa. Thus, there are plays from southern Africa (South Africa and Zambia), West Africa (Ghana), and East Africa (Kenya). In addition, one of the plays, *The Dilemma of a Ghost*, is female-authored. The collection of plays represents, in our view, a variety of

themes and approaches to writing dramatic texts. The common denominator among the four plays, however, is that they are all African plays written by African playwrights on issues relevant to the African experience.

### **3.0 Dramatic Text Vs Performance Text**

This study distinguishes between two types of text, the *dramatic text* and the *theatrical text*. While the former refers to the play as a written work before it is performed, the latter refers to the play as a performance – that is, the play as a stage production. The dramatic text may also be referred to as the playtext, while the theatrical text may also be referred to as the performance text, ‘production’ or ‘performance’.

From the semiotic point of view, both texts need to be ‘read’ appropriately in order to be understood or correctly interpreted. As Wallis (2002: 2) says, ‘The dramatic text is read on the page, the theatrical text is read by an audience from the stage.’ In other words, the written play might never be performed on stage, but every play, in our view, only reaches full realisation when it is performed. Thus, as Roberts and Jacobs (2007: 1272) argue, the playtext is in effect a plan for bringing the play into action on the stage: ‘As we read and talk about drama, we should always remind ourselves that *plays are meant to be acted*. It is performance that makes a play immediate, exciting, and powerful.’

A play, however, does not need to be performed to be called a play, neither does it always have to be written to be called a play, or even to be performed. Modern African drama, on the other hand, is script-based because of western influence. Drama, therefore, has the unique quality of communicating its message through two means – the playtext and the theatrical text, a position which Roberts and Jacobs support: ‘Drama is a unique genre because it can be presented and discussed both as literature – drama itself – and as performance – the production of plays in the theater’ (1265).

Notwithstanding the fact that plays are meant to be performed, we can still study a play that has not been or will never be performed. Reading a playtext is in itself a very rewarding exercise, as Roberts and Jacobs (1283) acknowledge:

[D]rama relies heavily on actors and directors to bring it to life. You might therefore ask why we bother to read plays without seeing them performed. The most obvious answer is that we may never get the chance actually to *see* a professional or amateur performance of a particular play. But we also read plays to familiarize ourselves with important literature. Plays are not simply maps to theatrical production; they are a significant and valuable part of our literary heritage... Reading a play, as opposed to attending a performance, carries both advantages and disadvantages. The major disadvantage is that we lack the immediacy of live theater. We do not see a majestic palace or a run-down living room, the rich robes of a king or the pathetic rags of a beggar, a vital and smiling young person or a tired and tearful old person. We do not hear the lovers flirting, the servants complaining, the soldiers boasting, the opponents threatening, the conspirators plotting; nor do we hear fanfares of trumpets or the sounds of a wedding ceremony or a funeral procession.

It would be possible, therefore, to say there is a clear distinction between the playtext and the theatrical text because the performance largely depends on the interpretation of the playtext by the director and or actor. The interpretation of meaning might also largely depend on the cultural context of the place where the performance takes place. Hence Sanger (2001: 10) is justified to argue that in most cases the playtext is 're-written' with each performance or direction.

Thom (1993: 12), to a certain extent, is right to state that in the case of a written play, 'author, performer, and audience are functionally distinct from one another, and the work is distinct from its performance'. Bentley (1968: 173) makes a similar point when he argues: 'A writer, *qua* writer, does not "need the theatre". He only needs a typewriter, a table, a chair and, surrounding these objects, four walls and a door that locks.'

While acknowledging the problematic nature of the relationship between drama and theatre, or the dramatic and theatrical texts, Kobernick draws our attention to the fact that

the semiotic processes involved in drama and theatre are largely different. Our view is that reading and watching a play are two different experiences (1989: 13):

Through seeing plays, reading them, and doing practical work in the theater, one comes to realize how different a piece is according to whether one acts, directs, views, or reads it. In the cases of reading and viewing, a person will read certain plays but not see them performed, and others one will see performed after having read them. Conversely, one will first see plays one has never read, and one may not subsequently read the play. Many questions arise about the relationship between the theatrical and the dramatic versions. One is the question of how a prior contact with a play in the other medium influences the viewer's perception and understanding of the work; whence one gradually becomes more and more aware of what the other text must, or might, be like when one has been limited to one of them.

Kobernick (14) argues that the problems relating to the relationship between the dramatic and theatrical text may be avoided by looking at the two texts semiotically.

We may well argue that this study does not need the theatre or the performance. It does not need the director or actor; neither does it need an actual stage or actual costume and props. The focus of this study is the playtext in its raw form – for the semiotic processes involved in the playtext are different from those involved in the theatrical text. In other words, we are concerned only with the semiotics of the dramatic text, not that of the performance.

#### **4.0 Contemporary African Drama: Its Context and Characteristics**

There has been a lot of debate around the question of what is or is not African drama, in much the same way as there has been unending debate on the exact definition of African literature in general. It would appear that the term African literature has become a literary conundrum. Since African dramatic texts are part of African literature, they have not been spared from the questions and confusion.

In his significant work, *The Theory of African Literature*, Amuta (1989) argues that ‘the problematisation of the identity of African literature is historical’, adding:

The quest for a definition is in itself an aspect of the ‘quest’ for the black man’s identity that was inaugurated in the wake of the slave trade and colonialism with their attendant dehumanisation and denigration. Because colonialist ideology called to question the basic humanity of the black man, the major features of the tradition of anti-colonial intellection in general have been heated reaffirmations, definitions and redefinitions of aspects of black culture and civilisation (104).

As an anecdote narrated by Achebe (1988: 249) demonstrates, the confusion and pessimism about African literature is more pronounced in the western world:

In the fall of 1974 I was walking one day from the English Department at the University of Massachusetts to a parking lot. It was a fine autumn morning such as encouraged friendliness to passing strangers. Brisk youngsters were hurrying in all directions, many of them obviously freshmen in their first flush of enthusiasm. An older man going the same way as I turned and remarked to me how very young they came these days. I agreed. Then he asked me if I was a student too. I said no, I was a teacher. What did I teach? African literature. Now that was funny, he said, because he knew a fellow who taught the same thing, or perhaps it was African history, in a certain Community College not far from here. It always surprised him, he went on to say, because he never had thought of Africa as having that kind of stuff, you know. By this time I was walking much faster. ‘Oh well,’ I heard him say finally, behind me: ‘I guess I have to take your course to find out.’

Some of the key questions surrounding the concept of African literature are captured by Tucker (1967: 2):

The search for a definition of African literature unearths other questions. Is African literature that body of work written by Africans or by writers of African descent? Or is it the literature created by writers throughout the world about the milieu, essence, and the thematic and psychic peculiarities of the African continent? Is African literature restricted to works written in a language native to

the African continent, or can certain works of an Englishman like Joyce Cary and an American like Ernest Hemingway be considered a part of African literature, at least in the broad view?’

These questions also apply to the debate on what constitutes African drama. Is it any drama written by anybody from anywhere in the world, regardless of their race and origins, as long as it is about Africa or is set in Africa? Is it only that corpus of plays written in foreign languages? It is our view that African drama is any piece of drama written by Africans, regardless of their skin colour, whether resident on the continent or in the diaspora, dealing with issues relevant to the African experience. We would add that African drama includes works written by North Africans of Arab stock, as well as white Africans from South Africa and other parts of the continent.

African drama is expressed both in African languages and the languages of the former colonial powers, in this case Portuguese, English and French. It would be possible to argue that a play written by an African in Chitonga or Kiswahili is as African as a play written by an African in any of the European languages. However, African drama generally falls into two broad categories, traditional and contemporary drama. This study is concerned with contemporary African drama.

In this study the term ‘contemporary’ is used in place of ‘modern’ in order to avoid the ambiguity created by the use of the latter term, which is generally employed to refer to a period in literature. Jones uses the term ‘modern African literature’ to mean literature ‘developed during the period of contact with non-African (European) peoples and their languages, the bulk of it coming just before and since independence’ (1996: 1). Nwoga (1979: 33), in his article entitled ‘Modern African Poetry: The Domestication of a Tradition’ explains his use of the term ‘modern’ thus: ‘By “modern” African poetry in my title I am referring to the work which is being written in the language derived from the colonial experience.’ Tucker, on the other hand, associates the term ‘contemporary fiction’ with writings on ‘modern Africa’ (1967: 5). Angoff and Povey (1969: 15) use the term contemporary to mean ‘literature being produced in present-day Africa’.

In this study, 'contemporary African drama' refers to the drama resulting from the contact between Africa and the colonial enterprise. However, the study recognises the fact that contemporary African drama is not only written in the languages of the former colonial masters, but also in African languages. In this study, however, all the four texts analysed are written in English.

Traditional African drama, as Clark (1973) says, is generally concerned with religious aims and rituals, while modern African drama is 'secular drama shading from the magical through a number of sub-kinds to the straight play and entertainment piece'. (20) A key distinction between the two, however, is that traditional drama is characteristically unscripted, while contemporary drama tends to be scripted. In other words, the playtext is the basis of contemporary African drama and is associated with what is sometimes referred to as 'literary theatre' (Clark 1973: 29).

We are aware, however, that some scholars have argued that the rituals of traditional African society do not constitute drama because, while drama is concerned with communication between human beings, ritual is concerned with communication between human beings and the gods or even the ancestral spirits (*mizimu*). Owomoyela (1991), for example, argues that drama is not synonymous with ritual because drama, as espoused by Aristotle, has specifications which are lacking in ritual. He disagrees with Clark's understanding of drama. In arguing the case for the existence of drama in Nigeria before the dawn of western civilisation, Clark (1973: 19) resorts to the Aristotelian tradition which sees drama as an imitation of action:

If drama means the 'elegant imitation' of some action significant to a people, if this means the physical representation or the evocation of one poetic image or a complex of such images, if the vital elements to such representation or evocation are speech, music, ritual, song as well as dance and mime, and if as the Japanese say of their Noh theatre, the aim is to 'open the ear' of the mind of a spectator in a corporate audience and 'open his eyes' to the beauty of form, then there is drama in plenty in Nigeria, much of this as distinctive as any in China, Japan and Europe.

Clark further says in his argument for the existence of drama in African ritual, with particular reference to Nigeria: 'As the roots of European drama go to the Egyptian Osiris and the Greek Dionysus so are the origins of Nigerian drama likely to be found in the early religious and magical ceremonies of the peoples of this country.'(quoted by Owomoyela, 1991) Finnegan (1970: 501) argues, on the basis of her definition of drama, that there was no dramatic expression in African society prior to the coming of western civilisation:

It is clearly necessary to reach at least some rough agreement about what is to count as 'drama'. Rather than produce a verbal definition, it seems better to point to the various elements which tend to come together in what, in the wide sense, we normally regard as drama. Most important is the idea of enactment, of representation through actors who imitate persons and events. This is usually associated with other elements, appearing to a greater or lesser degree at different times or places: linguistic content; plot; the represented interaction of several characters; specialized scenery, etc; often music, and – of particular importance in most African performances – dance.

Finnegan (502-3) concludes that what is termed as traditional African drama generally lacks the characteristics of drama as she defines it. In particular, she insists, what is called traditional African drama lacks the element of enactment. Thus, while Mwansa (1999), considers storytelling to be part of traditional African drama, Finnegan contends that storytelling cannot be 'drama' because, although the stories are enacted (in the sense that the speech and gestures of their characters are imitated by the narrator), the enactment is not sustained or complete. 'Thus storytelling can only be spoken of as possessing certain dramatic characteristics', but cannot be said to be 'drama' in the full sense.

Finnegan, of course, judges pieces of 'drama' by the rules set by the west, although even in the western world some dramatists, especially the avant-garde type, do not want to be bound by rules. The words of French dramatist Corneille are worth noting: 'It is

certain that there are laws of the drama, since it is an art; but it is not certain what these laws are' (Egri 1960: xv).

Ngugi, on the other hand, sees drama as originating in the human struggles with nature (1986: 36) and argues that the rituals and ceremonies of pre-colonial Kenya constituted dramatic expression. When warriors returned from war, he says, they engaged in ritual and ceremony of dramatic value: 'In song and dance they acted out the battle scenes for those who were not there and for the warriors to relive the glory, drinking in the communal admiration and gratitude' (36). Ngugi adds:

Drama in pre-colonial Kenya was not, then, an isolated event: it was part and parcel of the rhythm of daily and seasonal life of the community. It was an activity among other activities, often drawing its energy from those other activities. It was also entertainment in the sense of involved enjoyment; it was moral instruction; and it was also a strict matter of life and death and communal survival. This drama was not performed in special buildings set aside for the purpose. It could take place anywhere – wherever there was an 'empty space', to borrow the phrase from Peter Brook. 'The empty space', among the people, was part of that tradition (1986: 35).

According to Ngugi (1986), the Kenyan drama tradition was destroyed by the British colonialists, in its place imposing the British or European drama tradition based on Aristotelian prescriptions. Through his work at the Kamiriithu Community Education and Cultural Centre in the late 1970's, therefore, Ngugi sought to make use of the elements of form of the African theatre, which to him include song, dance, and mime (1986: 45-53).

Soyinka, while acknowledging the existence of the debate over whether or not ritual constitutes drama, argues that the distinction between ritual and drama was 'largely drawn by the European analyst' (Soyinka 1976: 7) According to him, the questions of whether ritual can be called drama, and at what point ritual or religious celebration can be considered transformed into drama, are 'largely artificial' (6). Soyinka argues that even avant-garde theatre practitioners in Europe have recognised ritual as part of dramatic

expression: 'The anguish over what is ritual and what is drama has indeed been rendered even more abstract by the recent reversion of European and American progressive theatre to ritualism in its "purest" attainable form' (6). We are inclined to agree with Soyinka, Ngugi and Clark on the question of whether or not ritual constitutes drama. Ritual elements are as much a part of modern African drama as any Aristotelian convention or prescription. Ritual has contributed to the development of contemporary African drama, in the same way that the dance dramas of South India developed from the ancient Dravidian shamanism and its rituals (Kirby 1975: 33).

It is apparent that even western drama had its origins in celebrations in honour of Dionysus, the god of wine and fertility (Lee 1996: 13). Finley (1963: 101) states that, although the tragic play of classical Greece was not a form of ritual drama, it nonetheless 'retained the closest ties with religion, in the first instance by its integral association with festivals'. Gwynn (2006: 3) states that Greek drama was 'an outgrowth of rites of worship of the god Dionysus'. Contemporary African drama, on the other hand, is in effect a hybrid form, blending western dramatic conventions, especially as originally espoused by Aristotle, and traditional forms of African artistic expression, including dance, song, poetry, and ritual. Aristotelian drama is characterised by such conventions as the plot, which, according to Aristotle, should have a beginning, a middle and an end.

Soyinka blends ritual elements and Aristotelian concepts into his dramas. His plays *The Strong Breed*, *A Dance of the Forests*, and *Death and the King's Horseman* are good examples of hybrid forms of African dramatic expression. Similarly, Ngugi's play *I Will Marry When I Want* is characterised by song, dance and mime. Kerr (1995: 121) notes Soyinka's inclination towards blending African and western forms of dramatic expression:

[Soyinka] draws considerably from African traditions of satirical farce and trickster narratives in his accessible comedies, *The Lion and the Jewel*, *The Trials of Brother Jero*, and *Jero's Metamorphosis...* Throughout his career Soyinka has kept contact in a dialectical fashion with the comic roots of his art, even while experimenting with avant-garde and western techniques... He is also a strong

admirer of Yoruba Opera, and acknowledges the influence of Ogunmola and Ladipo. The plot of *Death and the King's Horseman* is based on Duro Ladipo's opera *Oba Waja*, and the play's reliance on contrasting dances to express the core themes owes much to the influence of Yoruba Opera. Although Soyinka's *Opera Wonyosi* is based on Brecht's *Threepenny Opera*, the relationship between songs and dialogue and the play's ferocious topicality is close to the Yoruba Opera tradition.

Dathorne (1974: 411) also observes that the main style of Soyinka's play, *A Dance of the Forests*, is the dirge. However, the dirge in the context of the play is African, not western. In other words, Soyinka blends some aspects of the African dirge with some aspects of conventional western drama.

As Kerr points out, a number of African dramatists have, like Soyinka, researched into pre-colonial forms of African theatre. This has led to experimentation with African theatre forms and the creation of modern forms of African dramatic genres that Kerr terms 'neo-traditional drama'. Kerr names some of the dramatists engaged in creating neo-traditional drama as Wole Soyinka, Keita Fodeba, John Pepper Clark, Ola Rotimi, Credo Mutwa and Efua Sutherland (Kerr 114).

Unlike traditional African drama, however, contemporary African drama (or neo-traditional drama) tends to be scripted, usually in one of the European languages of the former colonial masters. The language factor in African literature in general, and in African drama in particular, has been an unending source of debate. Nevertheless, modern African drama has developed tremendously since the first African play in English, *Girl Who Killed to Save*, was published in 1935 (Dathorne 401).

## **5.0 The Language Factor in African Drama**

One of the major issues facing African writers and dramatists is the question of whether to write in a local language or one of the languages of the former colonial powers: English, Portuguese, or French. In other words, which language medium should they use in order for their work to qualify as 'African'? Can we say, for instance, that a play

written in English is African? This question is critical because all the plays to be analysed are written in English.

Had Africa not been colonised, perhaps the debate would never have arisen. However, the historical consequences of colonisation have, in part, led to a situation where the languages of the former colonial masters have largely become indispensable to the development of African societies formerly under colonial rule. Bjornson's observation (1991: 14-15) is relevant:

During the colonial era, people soon realized that it was in their interest to learn the language of the colonizer, for a knowledge of the French or English or Portuguese granted them access to the knowledge-power systems that had been imposed upon them. Those who became literate in these languages were well positioned to take advantage of the social and political institutions that evolved as African countries achieved independence, and since their privileged status depended in part on their mastery of a European language, they tended to favor its continued use for official purposes and in the schools. Furthermore, there were practical reasons for continuing to use European languages in Africa. Because of the ethnic diversity that characterized most African countries, the language of the former colonizer is often the only one that individuals from different areas have in common with each other.

Be that as it may, the debate on the merits and demerits of using European languages in African literature has raged for years with no end in sight. Broadly speaking, two main schools of thought have emerged on the question of language and African literature. According to one school of thought, only literature written in indigenous African languages qualifies to be classified as African literature. A related argument is that a truly African writer should only write in an African language, not in any of the languages of the former colonial masters. The opposing view, however, is that works written in foreign languages by Africans are as African as those written in indigenous languages. Consequently it is immaterial what language an African writer uses because what matters is that they write about the African experience, or from an African perspective.

The polarisation of opinion regarding what constitutes African literature came to the fore at the Conference of African Writers of English Expression held at Makerere University College in Uganda in June 1962. The conference dedicated its first session to the question, 'What is African Writing?' Ngugi, who attended the conference as a student, says of the debate that ensued:

The debate that followed was animated: Was it literature about Africa or about the African experience? Was it literature written by Africans? What about a non-African who wrote about Africa: did his work qualify as African literature? What if an African set his work in Greenland: did that qualify as African literature? Or were African languages the criteria? OK: what about Arabic, was it not foreign to Africa? What about French and English, which had become African languages? What if a European wrote about Europe in an African language? (Ngugi 1986: 6)

Barkan (1985: 32) states that the questions divided the participants. Unlike the Francophone writers,

the Anglophone writers asserted that feeling is universal, neither black nor white. Arthur Maimane suggested that African literature was simply writing from an African viewpoint. At this conference it was observed, possibly for the first time publicly – but certainly not for the last time – that perhaps there was no such thing as an African writing, only Uganda writing and Ghana writing and Nigeria writing. In brief, only national writing.... According to Bloke Modisane, the discussion at the conference ended with the acceptance of an unstated principle that 'the elements essential to African writing were the African point of view and a little of 'that feeling'.

In 1963, a conference was held in Freetown, Sierra Leone, on 'African Literature and the University Curriculum'. This conference concluded thus: 'The conference, being aware of the difficulty of defining African Literature, did not attempt to do so, but, for the purpose of its own deliberations, agreed that the term should cover literature in which an

African setting is authentically handled or to which experiences which originated in African are integral' (Barkan 32).

Suffice it to say, however, that none of the resolutions of such august gatherings have ended the debate on the definition of African literature. African writers remain divided between those who advocate the use of African languages and those who do not think it matters whether or not one uses a European language. One of the most significant proponents of the use of indigenous languages is Ngugi himself, who has written extensively on the subject. In addition, Ngugi has put his convictions into practice, writing a number of works in his native Gikuyu language, including a play *Ngahiika Ndeenda (I Will Marry When I Want)* and the novel *Devil on the Cross*.

According to Ngugi and those who share his viewpoint, language choice is determined by, and cannot be divorced from, audience considerations.

To choose a language is to choose a world, once said a West Indian thinker, and although I do not share the assumed primacy of language over the world, the choice of a language already pre-determines the answer to the most important question for producers of imaginative literature: For whom do I write? Who is my audience? If you write in a foreign language, French for instance, you can only reach a French-speaking audience; if in English, an English-speaking audience; in practice, foreigners and those of your people who know that foreign language. If a Kenyan writer writes in English – no matter how radical the content of that literature – he cannot possibly reach or directly talk to the peasants and workers of Kenya. If a Kenyan acts a play in English (or French as it is now becoming the fashion) he cannot possibly be assuming a truly Kenyan audience (Ngugi 1981: 53-4).

Ngugi was by no means the first to express such radical views about the use of foreign languages by African writers. In 1963, Nigerian critic, Obi Wali, caused controversy when he said in an article for *Transition* magazine:

The whole uncritical acceptance of English and French as the inevitable medium of educated African writing is misdirected and has no chance of advancing African writing and culture. In other words, until these writers and their western midwives accept the fact that any true African literature must be written in African languages, they would be merely pursuing a dead end, which can only lead to sterility, uncreativity, and frustration (quoted by Ngugi 1981: 55).

The argument from Ngugi and other like-minded scholars and writers is that every language has a natural link to the culture which produces it: 'Language, any language, has a dual character: it is both a means of communication and a carrier of culture' (Ngugi 1986: 13). In other words, English can only project or bear the burden of English culture, not African culture. On the other hand, only African languages can bear the burden of African culture. This view appears to have the support of White (1984: 22) who argues: 'The language... is the repository of the kinds of meaning and relation that make a culture what it is.'

Unlike Ngugi, however, Nigerian novelist Chinua Achebe contends that writing in foreign languages is not anathema for African writers. The language of the colonial master, he insists, can be harnessed for the purpose of expressing African thought and reflecting the African experience, a view which he has professed through the generous use of African proverbs, songs and riddles in his work. While acknowledging that writing in a foreign language – more specifically English, which is his main concern – Achebe argues that the success or failure of such a venture depends, largely, on the skill and creativity of the writer:

For an African, writing in English is not without its serious set-backs. He often finds himself describing situations and modes of thought which have no direct equivalent in the English way of life. Caught in the situation he can do one of two things. He can try and contain what he wants to say within the limits of conventional English or he can try to push back those limits to accommodate his ideas. The first method produces competent, uninspired and rather flat work. The second method will produce something new and valuable to the English language

as well as to the material he is trying to put over. *But* it can also get out of hand. It can lead to simply *bad* English being accepted or defended as African or Nigerian. I submit that those who can do the work of extending the frontiers of English so as to accommodate African thought-patterns must do it through their mastery of English and not out of innocence (Ford, 1983: 330).

More than any other Anglophone writer, Achebe has contributed to the extending of the frontiers of English by using it effectively to accommodate African thought-patterns. This feat is best demonstrated in his classic novel, *Things Fall Apart*, one of the best novels ever written in English by an African. According to Ford (330), one of Achebe's greatest achievements is 'the creation of a staple prose style which while incorporating African usages and thought patterns is fluent, lucid – and impeccably good English. The achievement is the reverse of innocent. It is, on the contrary, the product of a sophisticated mind thoroughly educated in English language and literature'.

This study is inclined to agree with Chukwukere (1972: 25) who argues thus:

... the problem of the language of literary art, as it exists in African today, is first and foremost that creative writers should try to master their medium, English or French or any African language. Writing in one's native tongue does not solve the issue overnight. As much bad writing could be produced in Ibo by a native Ibo as by the same person in English. This applies to good writing as well. The core of the matter lies in effective control of the levels of utterance appropriate to the author, to the different persons of the story, and to the diverse occasions and contexts in which they encounter one another. And here the artist has got somewhat of a trump card: he can make his characters do whatever he likes, unfettered by the facts of history or incidents of actual life. However, he should be consistent and present a verisimilitude of life.

This view is supported by the Nigerian playwright Clark (1973: 31) who argues that the task of the African dramatist writing in a European language such as English is 'one of finding the verbal equivalent for his characters created in their original and native

context'. Similarly, Achebe's stance is that '*which* language is used is less important than *how* language is used' (Barkan 1985: 34). The question of how language is used, as Ngugi himself correctly points out, can lead to contradictions at the level of language as a means of characterisation. This is what he says of the confusion that can arise from language as a tool of characterisation in a modern African play written in English:

Indeed in all three plays, *The Black Hermit*, *This Time Tomorrow*, and *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi*, there were very obvious contradictions though these were more apparent on the stage than in the script. In the opening line of *The Black Hermit* the peasant mother is made to speak in a poetic language reminiscent in tone to T. S. Eliot. The elders from a rural outpost come to town for their son, the black hermit, and speak in impeccable English. So does Kimathi, in *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi*, even when addressing his guerilla army or the peasants and workers in court. Admittedly it is understood that the characters are speaking an African language. But this is only an illusion since they are conceived in English and they speak directly in English. There are other contradictions too: these characters speak English but when it comes to singing they quite happily and naturally fall back into their languages. So they *do* know African languages! The illusion that in speaking English they were really speaking an African language is broken. The realism in theatre collides with the historical reality it is trying to reflect. It is only petty-bourgeois characters – those who have been to schools and universities – who normally and quite freely mix English with African languages in the same sentence or speech (Ngugi 1986: 43).

Esslin (1967: 255-62), while commenting on the plays of Wole Soyinka and John Pepper Clark, raises similar concerns on the use of European languages in African plays:

[T]he problem arises from the nature of drama itself. These plays are by Africans about Africans in an African social context. And they are, largely, about Africans who, in reality, speak their own African languages. It is here that the problem lies. We are here presented with African peasants, African fishermen, African labourers expressing themselves in impeccable English. Of course in reality they speak their own languages equally impeccably and the playwrights have merely

translated what they would have said in those languages into the equivalent English. Precisely! Which is to say the original plays labour under the universal handicap of all translated drama. And anyone who has to deal with the problems of plays in translation, as I have to almost daily, will know what an enormous handicap that represents! How should a French peasant in a play by, let us say, Pagnol, speak in English?

However, as Achebe has ably demonstrated in *Things Fall Apart*, it is possible to use the English language in such a way that the African characters in a play, whatever their age and occupation, can be made to speak in a way befitting their status and background. It is, however, equally important to note the fact that, while Achebe argues for the use of the English language as a vehicle for conveying African cultural thought, he indirectly acknowledges that the English language cannot carry out the task perfectly. In other words, the English language, and indeed French and other European languages, will still have limitations when it comes to reflecting some concepts of African culture. However, as Komey and Mphahlele (1964: 12) argue, Africans writing in English can bring new experience to the English language and enrich it, in part by making it capture African speech idioms.

In order to handle the problem of limitation, Achebe and other modern African writers use the African words or expressions that best convey the meaning or concept. Thus, for example, it is commonplace in the novels of Achebe to come across terms like 'chi', an Ibo term for personal god which has no equivalent in English. Similarly, Soyinka uses Yoruba words to express concepts that have no English equivalent, or which would be diluted if English were used. For example, in the play *Kongi's Harvest* Soyinka chooses to use the words 'ewo' and 'l'ogolonto' instead of the English equivalents 'taboo' and 'stark naked'. The Yoruba words are, in this context, more effective than the English words.

The recourse to African words and expressions is more common when songs are included in a modern African play. The songs are usually in the African language, although an

English translation is usually provided – but only for the purpose of making the reader understand, not for the purpose of having the song sung in English. When words or expressions are translated from the African language into English, it is easier to see that an African language is used than when the character is made to speak the English equivalent of what he or she says in the African language. To determine this one needs to determine whether, for example, the character is educated or not, and whether the language used is therefore ‘appropriate’.

The main preoccupation of this study, on the other hand, is not the appropriateness, or lack of it, of language used by the various characters, but rather the meaning of what they say. The challenge, of course, is to determine when the character is speaking in an ‘African language’ even if they are made to speak in English. When does a character speak actual English and not a local language textually expressed in English? When they speak in English, how does the type of English distinguish between an educated African and an uneducated one, for example? Questions of this nature are paramount when determining the meaning of particular expressions in the dialogue of the texts.

Achebe has, in his works of fiction, gone to great lengths to distinguish characters according to the type of language they speak. Not only has he managed to distinguish characters within *Things Fall Apart*, but has also stylistically distinguished whole novels from each other, depending on the setting. Thus, the stylistic content of *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God*, both of which deal with a mostly rural setting, differs from that of *A Man of the People*, *No Longer at Ease* and *Anthills of the Savannah*, whose setting is predominantly urban.

Lindfors (1972: 4) makes a relevant observation:

What gives each of Achebe’s novels an air of historical authenticity is his use of the English language. He has developed not one prose style but several, and in each novel he is careful to select the style or styles that will best suit his subject. In dialogue, for example, a westernised African character will never speak exactly like a European character nor will he speak like an illiterate village elder. Achebe,

a gifted ventriloquist, is able to individualise his characters by differentiating their speech.

Achebe makes a conscious effort to distinguish one character from another using stylistic devices, even if the characters use 'English' when talking. His personal views on the matter give us more insight into his approach to the use of the English language:

My answer to the question, can an African learn English well enough to be able to use it effectively in creative writing? is certainly yes. If on the other hand you ask: can he ever learn to use it like a native speaker? I should say, I hope not. It is neither necessary nor desirable for him to be able to do so... he should aim at fashioning out an English which is at once universal and able to carry his peculiar experience... I have been given this language English and I intend to use it... I feel that the English language will be able to carry the weight of my African experience. But it will have to be a new English, still in full communion with its ancestral home but altered to suit its new African surroundings (quoted in Moody 1984: 15-16).

Mwansa (1999: 32) lends weight to this view by arguing that Zambian traditional elements of theatre such as song, dance and choreography should be infused into modern African dramatic expression. He adds:

We should also go beyond using these elements as mere embellishments but should use our idiom, and incorporate poetry, beliefs and social values into the dialogues of our stage characters. The languages of colonialists bequeathed on our societies should be decontextualised and reshaped to serve our purposes. We may have to take many liberties with and use them to work for us in the manner that is quite different from the way they were used to shape us after the fashion of the colonial culture.

For the purposes of this study, therefore, one of our main concerns is to explore the extent to which the English language carries the weight of the African experience or serves the purpose of expressing the African experience or culture. If, as Langacker (1973: 17) observes, 'language and culture are tightly intertwined', then the challenge of the

contemporary African dramatist is to make English, which is 'intertwined' with English (western) culture, carry the burden of a different culture, the African one.

Some Africans are of the view that English and other European languages have been used by Africans on the continent for so long that there is a sense in which they have rightly become 'African languages' and should therefore be able to bear the burden of African culture. Moody's observation (1984: 14-15) supports this view:

The assumption of many writers who criticize the use of English as a second language is that it embodies a foreign view of the world which comes into conflict with the world view of the first language. But of course this element of language, like all its other elements, is constantly changing. *There is a sense in which English 'belongs to' Zambia and is a Zambian language as much as it belongs to any other place.* Language defines men, but surely the opposite is also true – otherwise languages would remain static. *We, both as individuals and as communities, 'own' a language when we impose our personalities upon it, conquer it, for it to serve our purposes.* The best writers always do this with language, and it is one reason why languages change and develop in certain directions... If there are 'good' users of English in Zambia, *then English is a Zambian language capable of expressing what Zambians want it to express.* (emphasis mine)

Moody gives an example of Achebe who claims the language as his own: 'I have been given this language English and I intend to use it.'

Whether English is considered an African language or not, it has become a very significant tool for the contemporary African dramatist, and has become so intertwined with African culture as expressed in the contemporary African play, that debating its relevance or irrelevance has become a mere academic exercise. Since the plays to be analysed are written in English, our concern should be with the question of the projection and interpretation of meaning.

## 6.0 The Dramatic Text as Communication

Dramatic texts, like other forms of discourse, are a form of human communication. As Owomoyela (1991: 151) has correctly observed, drama ‘involves humans communicating with humans, or with a human audience’. Dramatic communication is at two levels:

- (i) the author communicating to the reader (who might be the actor, director, teacher, or researcher, etc);
- (ii) the characters in the play communicating with each other and the audience.

We are of the view that, in order to correctly interpret meaning in a dramatic text, we need to be aware of the two levels of communication. If, for example, we fail to grasp the meaning of a dialogue between two characters, it means, by extension, that we cannot correctly interpret what the dramatist is communicating or intends to communicate. We are also of the view that it is vital to recognise the fact that communication is both verbal and non-verbal, and that we are in a state of constant communication. As Kaul (2007: 1) notes, ‘whether we are sitting, walking, talking, listening or thinking, we are engaged in some form of communication’. He acknowledges the fact that communication can be verbal or non-verbal (1).

Communication is a science, and that is why it is possible to study it systematically. Although human beings have been communicating from time immemorial, it was only Aristotle who, in his classic work *Rhetoric*, tried to provide a scientific explanation of communication. According to the Aristotelian model, communication has three components – a sender, receiver and a message (Kaul 5). The only weakness with the Aristotelian model is that it perceived communication as a one-way process – that is, from the sender to the receiver. The reaction or feedback of the receiver was not considered important.

However, most modern theorists of communication agree that the feedback from the receiver of the message is also important and relevant to the process of communication. In other words, communication is only complete when there is appropriate feedback from

the receiver – that is, the feedback must be able to enable the sender of the message to know that the receiver has correctly interpreted and understood the message.

One of the most respected models of communication is that proposed by Wilbur Schramm in 1955. It was considered a breakthrough in the field of communication because it was the first to propose the significance of a response from the receiver.

Together with the encoding of the message and transmission of the same through a proper channel, it necessitated that the receiver after decoding the message transmitted the response to the sender. The scope was now extended to encompass within it both the sender as well as the receiver together with the important component of the message and the feedback. The path observed by communication was circuitous with a feedback system ingrained in it (Kaul 6).

This study is premised on the understanding that there are factors that affect both the encoding and decoding of the message, and that culture is one of the factors. In other words, when the sender decides to encode the message, they do not do so in a cultural vacuum. Similarly, the receiver does not decode the message in a cultural vacuum. In both cases, personal experience and perception of issues are vital.

In the case of the author communicating with the reader or audience, the author plays the role of the sender, while the reader or audience is the receiver. The ‘message’ is the dramatic text, encoded using a complex set of signs – through the dialogue, actions, costume of the characters, and stage directions, among others. The meaning of specific signs, however, is determined by the context. When the characters are dialoguing or interacting, they generally interchange the roles of sender and receiver. In other words, when a character is communicating some information, whether by speech or actions, he or she is the sender, while the other character is the receiver. However, when the recipient of the information responds, the roles are reversed.

The two levels of communication are however interlinked. In other words, when the characters communicate with each other, they are also indirectly communicating with the reader/audience. In other words, the reader must understand the communication between

the characters, and the links between the actions and events, in order to understand the message of the play. Usually the 'message' takes the form of a theme or themes.

Another way of looking at the issue is that experienced playwrights will, ideally, first decide on the purpose of writing the play, then identify the theme or themes they wish to 'communicate' (or explore) in a play. After that they will then plan the content, style and structure of the play in such a way that they move the play in the intended direction. Hence the characters, dialogue, actions and interactions, costume, scenes, movements, will all be carefully designed so as to attain the objective or objectives. In so saying, however, we have to note that dramatic texts are such complex forms of discourse that readers might see themes or messages which the dramatist neither sees nor intended. On the other hand, the reader might fail to identify the theme or themes (message) intended by the dramatist. This could be due to misinterpretation, which could in turn be due to cultural perception.

It would be reasonable to assume that the process of interpreting communication *from* and *within* the playtext involves questions such as, 'What are the characters communicating to each other and how do cultural factors influence their communication?' Also, 'What is the playwright communicating to the reader and what role do cultural factors play in the process?' The ultimate question, it would appear, is, 'What is the relationship between culture and communication?'

## **7.0 Culture and Communication**

Having taken the position that the dramatic text is a form of communication, we need to also highlight the relationship between culture and communication. More specifically, we need to highlight the extent to which cultural orientation affects communication, both within intercultural and intracultural contexts. In other words, how does culture influence the creation as well as interpretation of meaning?

What complicates this question is that even societies that may be said to have one culture may well have more than one within the perceived mono-culture. For example, while we

reasonably talk of ‘Zambian culture,’ we need to be wary of the fact that Zambian society is multicultural and multilingual and can therefore not really have a homogenous culture. This is a case of cultural pluralism, or ‘the existence of different social or cultural groups within a single society’ (Garrison 1983: 1). Hence even Zambians might have problems communicating with each other because of cultural differences.

Charpentier (1993: 9-10) makes a pertinent observation when talking about the interpretation of the Bible:

When we are confronted with a text, above all an ancient text, we instinctively think rather like this. The author had something to say, a meaning to communicate. He wrapped up this meaning in his own words and in his own culture. So our task today consists of unwrapping this meaning and wrapping it up again in our own words...As we read a text, we reshape it in the light of what we are ourselves. That is quite normal.

It is the ‘reshaping’ that can cause problems of interpretation, because the tool with which we reshape what other people say is personal experience and cultural perception. The reshaping can lead to distortion because of cultural prejudice, which evolves around the notion that one’s culture is superior to that of another person. On the other hand some individuals suffer from cultural cringe, which is the ‘belief that one’s own country’s culture is inferior to that of others’ (Rees 2006: 153).

The African continent has been a victim of cultural prejudice from the western world partly because of the coloniser-colonised relationship of the past. The conquering nation or culture considers itself superior to the conquered nation or culture, and the result is cultural prejudice and cultural erosion. The coloniser, in part because of the need to legitimise and justify the occupation, embarks on a conscious crusade to suppress or eliminate the culture of the subjugated people. Thus, for example, the dispossession of Australia’s Aborigines of their traditional lands has impacted upon their societies across Australia. Aboriginal cultures have been eroded and destroyed (Singh et al 2001: 106).

The very concept of cultural pluralism or multiculturalism is destroyed by cultural prejudice or cultural colonialism. As Turner (1999: 52) observes, 'fair and proper multiculturalism can only exist when each individual culture, whatever its size, is respected by other cultures, is allowed, by the internal and external contexts in which it operates, to develop freely and, most importantly, is able to function in a way relevant to its own audience'.

Cultural prejudice, however, is not just a characteristic of the invading culture or people, but also of the invaded culture or people. When the western settlers came to Africa (especially the missionaries), for example, they initially found it difficult to be accepted or to impart western ideas on the indigenous people, who were suspicious of new ideas. In other words, what existed was what Snelson (1974: 18) refers to as a 'cultural chasm'. It is apparent that the cultural prejudice was not just one way, that is, from the coloniser to the colonised, but also vice versa. In the end, it was the superior military might of the western settlers that triumphed, in the process eroding the cultures of the conquered African peoples.

It is our view, however, that the cultural prejudice against Africa is not only caused by the fact that some western powers colonised the continent, but also by the consistent negative publicity from western literature and media. Salvoldi and Sesana (1986: 16) lend weight to this view: 'The impression of Africa given by the international mass-media is overwhelmingly negative. It is mentioned only when there is famine, hunger, torture or a coup d'etat.'

The type of information that finds its way into our mind eventually shapes our perception of ourselves and other people or cultures. Hence the general perception of Africa in the western world is negative. Chen and Starosta (1998: 33) correctly point out that 'our perception depends on our cultural experiences', and that 'a person's culture has a strong impact on the perception process' (35) because culture 'not only provides the foundation for the meanings we give to our perceptions, it also directs us toward specific kinds of messages and events' (35). It is our view that when dealing with people from a different

culture it is important to make an effort to bridge the cultural chasm if communication is to occur meaningfully and successfully. We need to reorient ourselves so that we, as much as possible, begin to perceive things the way they perceive them.

Obama (2008:328), for example, found himself having to make adjustments to his perception of things when he first visited his father's native Kenya. Having been born and bred in the United States of America, Obama had a western understanding of 'family' which, upon visiting Nairobi, 'almost immediately collapsed'. He adds that 'family seemed to be everywhere in stores, at the post office, on streets and in the parks (328). Kaunda (1987: 11) sheds more light on the African understanding of the concept of family which is very alien to western culture:

An African does not restrict the title 'father' to his male parent. He also addresses his father's brothers as 'father'. And he calls his mother's sisters 'mother' also. Only his father's sisters would be addressed as 'aunt' and his mother's brother's 'uncle'. 'Brothers' would include not only the male children of his father but also certain cousins and even members of the same clan who have no blood relationship in the Western sense... this confusing state of affairs is not merely a matter of terminology. These are not just courtesy titles. With the title 'father', for example, goes all the responsibility of parenthood and in return all the 'fathers' receive filial devotion. Hence, no child in a traditional society is likely to be orphaned.

Cultural differences cause people to perceive things differently, and this can impact on communication. As Chen and Starosta (1998: 28) observe, the 'potential for miscommunication and disagreements is great because of cultural differences'. Thus, for example, while the western mind perceives of a dog as a pet that needs tender loving care, a Chinese perceives it as a delicacy which might have to be slaughtered and eaten. Culture, as Maeda (1975: 130) says, causes people to read their environments differently.

This point is illustrated in the way different people interpret colours. Fontana (1993: 67) says of the different interpretations of the colour black: 'In the West, black is a symbol of

death, sorrow and the underworld. The black cat seen as a portent of good luck is a relatively modern notion. To the Hindus black represents time, and Kali, the destroying goddess. To the Egyptians it was the colour of rebirth and resurrection.'

Each person's culture is in turn determined by the society in which they grow up or are nurtured. Each society, as Crollins (1986: 59) argues, 'possesses its own culture: its own inherited system of meanings...' Geertz (1975: 89) also argues that 'culture denotes an historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions, expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitudes toward life'.

However, while acknowledging the significance of the role of culture in communication, we might do well to note that culture is not easy to define – a fact which is underlined by the presence of many definitions of culture. Thus, as far back as the 1950's A L Kroeber and Clyde Kluckhohn counted almost 200 definitions of culture (Levo-Henriksson 1994: 5). Levo-Henriksson observes that, while to anthropologists culture is perceived in general terms as the whole way of life of a society, to sociologists culture is perceived as 'human beings' intellectual, moral or other mental abilities which separate them from other animals' (1994: 5).

The arts are also part of the cultural expression of a particular people or society. Thus Bate (2002: 18) argues that culture is expressed through popular art forms such as music. The popular forms of artistic expression largely reflect the cultural orientation of a particular society. Hence Inge (1981: ix) argues that popular culture 'is a mirror wherein society can see itself and better understand its own character and needs'.

In Zambia the arts are considered to be an indispensable part of the national culture. This includes dance, music, visual arts, poetry, and drama. In its National Policy on Culture, the Zambian government perceives culture as 'a unique and irreplaceable body of values and its presence is demonstrated through traditions and forms of expression' (Ministry of Community Development and Social Services 2003: 3). The policy's standpoint is that

each of Zambia's 73 ethnic groups possesses its own unique set of traditions and forms of expression which demonstrate their cultural identity. The policy further states (3): 'Cultural heritage includes both tangible and intangible works of society's artists, architects, musicians, writers, and scientists and is expressed through languages, rites, beliefs, historic places and monuments, literature, works of art, archives and libraries.'

We might do well, in discussing the role of culture in the semiotics of drama, to note that drama is in itself a form of cultural expression. This means any dramatic piece will inevitably bear the burden of the dramatist's cultural experience. As Bentley (1968: 168) observes, a work of art 'springs from its author's nature'. He further observes that Shakespeare's plays 'prove that he had studied and absorbed the whole culture of his day' (171). Manganaro (2002: 105), similarly, argues that James Joyce's *Ulysses* constitutes 'the record of a particular culture or people, the rendering of a day in the life of Dubliners'.

Hence it is necessary to have an idea of the cultural context of a play, and the cultural background of the dramatist, if one is to competently interpret the contents of a play. Brooks' observation (1961: 573) is quite pertinent:

It is perfectly true that our understanding of a play may depend upon a knowledge of the ideas and customs of the period in which it was written. If we are, for example, to understand, in Sophocles' *Antigone* the conflict between the claims of state and the claims of blood, we need to know the importance of Greek burial sites. If we do understand the fearful consequences for the dead man of his body's not receiving burial, then an adequate motive is supplied for Antigone's action.

The need to understand a play's cultural and historical context applies to anyone who reads a play, be it a student, scholar, literary critic, actor, or stage director. It is for this reason that Nagler (1952: xxiii) states:

A stage director is doomed when without knowledge of the historical facts, he is called upon to adapt and produce a classical play for a modern audience. In handling the classics the director must be fully informed of the conditions of the

original productions and of the cultural background against which the plays initially came to life.

The reader of a play behaves in a similar manner to the person who watches the play performed on stage. Both perceive the play from the perspective of their culture. What Rowe (2007: 47) says of audiences also applies to the reader of the play: 'All audiences bring to a performance culturally inscribed expectations of what constitutes a theatrical event. These will be influenced by socio-economic and geographic factors as well as by personal history and experience. Personal and social histories of theatre-going are bound to influence what audience members come to expect from a performance.'

It is apparent that the process of interpretation of a play is a product of negotiation between the writer's cultural background and that of the reader. In our view, therefore, the reader must be careful not to ignore the writer's cultural background, on the one hand and, on the other, not to allow his or her cultural orientation or perception to unduly influence the interpretation of the text. The danger of misinterpretation due to cultural perception is real and present.

A case of misinterpretation due to cultural perception occurred in Zambia in 1969 when David Pownall, a Briton flown in to adjudicate plays at the annual Theatre Association of Zambia (TAZ) festival failed to grasp the content of the play *The Fools Marry*. The play, written by Kabwe Kasoma, was entered in the competition by the University of Zambia Dramatic Arts Society (UNZADRAMS).

Pownall's British cultural orientation influenced his perception of the play, which he rated one of the poorest in the festival, leading to an antagonistic reaction from the Zambian audience, particularly UNZADRAMS. According to Mwansa (1999: 65), the confrontation occurred because Pownall 'failed to understand the cultural content of the play'. In particular, Pownall failed to understand a line which was a reference to men going to the moon (referring to menstruation). For the Zambians in the audience who

understood the expression, it worked effectively as a joke. Kerr (1995: 110) also states that the adjudicator ‘totally missed’ the point of the joke.

The play was extremely popular with ordinary people, especially because its dialogue accurately captured the speech idiosyncrasies of the Copperbelt mining compounds (Kerr 109). The local people could therefore not understand Pownall’s decision to rank the play lowly. The author of *The Fools Marry*, Kasoma, in the introduction to the published version of the play, attempts to explain why Pownall acted the way he did:

He could not make up his mind whether the play was a tragedy or a comedy. It just did not measure up to the rules of comedy or tragedy as he knew them in Western theatre’s cultural tradition. The adjudicator was both angered and puzzled when the black Zambian part of the audience burst out in laughter at a certain line which, in the adjudicator’s estimation, did not constitute a joke (quoted in Kerr 109).

It is reasonable to state that culture is an indispensable factor in the creation and interpretation of meaning, not just in life in general, but also in the modern African dramatic text. This acknowledgement notwithstanding, it is important to recognise that African culture is not homogenous, but that each African society or country has its own culture, although various African cultures have some common ground.

This, in our view, means that each of the four texts to be analysed is a product of a unique cultural context. Thus, while some tools of analysis might apply to all the four texts, purely and only on the basis that they are all products of African dramatists, other factors are culture-specific and, by extension, text-specific. Furthermore, we need to be cognizant of the fact that even within one country there can be no homogenous culture. Zambia, for example, cannot be said to have one culture, but rather a variety of cultures largely determined by ethnicity. Most importantly, we need to be aware that any playtext can be read semiotically because, as Bal (1997: 220) states, semiotics ‘applies to virtually every cultural object’.

## 8.0 Cultural Authenticity

The concept of cultural authenticity is an elusive one, as is the definition. However, it is relevant to the conclusions drawn by this study. Many scholars are reluctant to provide a prescriptive or formulaic definition of the term. Rudine Sims Bishop goes so far as to suggest that cultural authenticity cannot be defined but that ‘you know it when you see it’ when you read a book about your own culture (Short and Fox 2003: 15).

Scholars have debated the concept of cultural authenticity for years. Fox and Short (2003: 20-21) give examples of the different opinions held by scholars, writers and teachers about the concept of cultural authenticity:

‘Authenticity is the success with which a writer is able to reflect the cultural perspectives of the people whom he or she is writing about, and make readers from the inside group believe that he or she “knows what’s going on” (Rudine Sims Bishop)’... ‘An authentic work is a work that feels alive – something true from the culture exists there and creates a connection between its creator and its reader’... ‘Cultural authenticity is not just accuracy or the avoidance of stereotypes, but involves cultural values, facts, and attitudes that members of the culture as a whole consider worthy of acceptance and belief’ ...

Kramsch (1993: 178) notes, however, that ‘it has become commonplace to say that authenticity does not lie in the text but in the uses speakers and readers make of it’. She quotes Widdowson who had examined the concept of the authentic text in 1979:

It is probably better to consider authenticity not as a quality residing in instances of language but as a quality which is bestowed upon them, created by the response of the receiver. Authenticity in this view is a function of the interaction between the reader/hearer and the text which incorporates the intentions of the writer/speaker... Authenticity has to do with appropriate response (Kramsch 1993: 178).

Whatever else may be said about cultural authenticity, the debate is based on the insider-outsider dichotomy. In other words, while one school of thought argues that only an ‘insider’ can write about a particular culture convincingly and authentically, the other

argues that even an ‘outsider’ can write about a culture to which they do not belong; while the one argues that only an ‘insider’ can validly interpret a text, the other insists that even an ‘outsider’ can interpret a culture-specific text.

Barthes and those in his school of thought would argue, of course, that making an ‘insider-outsider’ distinction between readers is of no consequence because anyone, even a person alien to the author’s culture, has the right to interpret any work of art according to their own experience or perception. The question of whether the text is authentic or not becomes irrelevant, because it bears no meaning other than what the reader decides. The position of this study, as earlier stated, is that the writer matters as much as the reader in the enterprise of creation and interpretation of meaning. The question that this study has to answer, therefore, is whether outsiders can write about an alien culture in an authentic manner or whether they can arrive at a valid interpretation of a text written in an alien culture.

It is this vital question that Henry Louis Gates Jr sought to answer when he published an article in *The New York Times* entitled, ‘ “Authenticity”, or the Lesson of Little Tree’ (1991: 26-30). The article is a review of Forrest Carter’s bestselling book *The Education of Little Tree*, first published in 1976. When in 1985 the University of Mexico Press bought the book’s rights from the original publishers, Delacorte Press and republished it, the book became a huge success.

In his article, Gates writes:

The recent case of Forrest Carter, the author of the bestselling ‘Education of Little Tree,’ provides yet another occasion to reflect on the troublesome role of authenticity. Billed as a true story, Carter’s book was written as the autobiography of Little Tree, orphaned at the age of 10, who learns the ways of Indians from his Cherokee grandparents in Tennessee. ‘The Education of Little Tree’, which has sold more than 600, 000 copies, received an award from the American Booksellers Association as the title booksellers most enjoyed selling. It was sold on the gift tables on Indian reservations and assigned as supplementary reading

for courses on Native American literature. Major studios vied for movie rights. And the critics loved it.

The work was touted as autobiographical account of the life of Little Tree, starting in the late 1930's. The protagonist is given over into the care of his Cherokee grandparents at the age of five, while most of the story takes place when he is six and living in a remote mountain hollow. The book was a largely convincing account of the life of a native Indian boy. In other words, most of the readers, both 'insiders' and 'outsiders' to the Cherokee culture, considered the book to be 'authentic'.

On October 4, 1991, however, the truth about the real author of the book came out through an article in *The New York Times* entitled, 'The Transformation of a Klansman'. Written by Dan T Carter, history professor at Emory University, the article revealed that Forrest Carter was in fact Asa Earl Carter, a whiteman who was once a staunch member of the white supremacist Ku Klux Klan:

'The Education of Little Tree' is a hoax. The carefully constructed mask of Forrest Carter – Cherokee cowboy, self-taught writer and spokesman for Native Americans – was simply the last fantasy of a man who reinvented himself again and again in the 30 years that preceded his death in 1979. His real name was Asa (Ace) Earl Carter. We share a common Southern heritage and he may be a distant cousin of mine. Between 1946 and 1973, the Alabama native carved out a violent career in Southern politics as a Ku Klux Klan terrorist, right-wing radio announcer, home-grown American fascist and anti-Semite, rabble-rousing demagogue and secret author of the famous 1963 speech by Gov. George Wallace of Alabama: 'Segregation now... Segregation tomorrow... Segregation forever'...

In his article, Gates rightly argues that Asa Carter's fraud succeeded because he was able to give the American people what they expected of an 'authentic' text. However, Gates notes that the Carter story was not the only one in the history of American literature to benefit from the emphasis on authenticity. Some of the writers of American slave narratives were not 'genuine'.

The authorship of slave narratives published between 1700 and 1865 was also fraught with controversy. To give credence to their claims about the horrors of slavery, American abolitionists urgently needed a cadre of ex-slaves who could compellingly indict their masters with first-person accounts of their bondage. For this tactic to succeed, the ex-slaves had to be authentic, their narratives full of convincing, painstaking verisimilitude. So popular did these become, however, that two forms of imitators soon arose: white writers, adopting a first-person black narrative persona, gave birth to the pseudoslave narrative; and black authors, some of whom had never even seen the South, a plantation or a whipping post, became literary lions virtually overnight.

In concluding his article, Gates makes it clear his questioning of the relevance of authenticity does not mean social or cultural identities are not important: 'They do matter. And our histories, individual and collective, do affect what we wish to write and what we are able to write. *But that relation is never one of fixed determinism. No human culture is inaccessible to someone who makes the effort to understand, to learn, to inhabit another world*' (emphasis mine).

If there is any lesson to learn from the controversy surrounding *The Education of Little Tree*, then it is the fact that it is possible for an outsider to learn about another culture and appropriate it. In other words, 'learning' is the key. One can learn about a culture through interaction and thorough research and write an 'authentic' work about it. Thus, the authenticity of the four African dramatic texts analysed in the study does not lie so much in the fact that they are written by Africans as in the realisation that 'you know it when you see it', to borrow the words of Rudine Sims Bishop.

Similarly, the outsider can arrive at a valid interpretation of cultural signifiers if he is familiar, through learning or research, with the culture which produces the signifiers. Asa Carter proved that it could be done. He never lived among Cherokee Indians. However, he thoroughly researched their lives and the result was the bestselling 'authentic' book. A more familiar example for the African context, perhaps, is that of Joseph Greenberg, the

Jewish American who, despite not being African himself, conducted seminal research on African languages, and even developed a classification system for Bantu languages. His 1955 publication, *Studies in African Linguistic Classifications*, has not lost its significance even in contemporary African linguistic scholarship. It is still a useful text for students and scholars of Bantu linguistics.

Similarly, Malcolm Guthrie, despite being born in England of a Scottish father and a Dutch mother, also conducted important research on African languages, publishing his findings in *The Classification of Bantu Languages* (1948). While some African scholars might not agree with him on some aspects of his work, they cannot, however, dismiss his publication as lacking 'authenticity'. By contrast, the four texts in this study were written by Africans. However, they may still be read by non-Africans as long as they understand the cultural context of the works and the authors.

Despite the difficulties of defining cultural authenticity, we are of the view that one of the characteristics of African plays is that most of them make an effort to create African characters talk in an 'authentic' manner.

## **9.0 Signs, Interpretation and Meaning in the Dramatic Text**

### **9.1 Nature of the Sign**

It is our view that signs cannot be separated from the creation and interpretation of meaning. Signs are the means by which meaning is shaped and conveyed. Hence Clarke Jr (1990: 1) observes: 'A sign is any object of interpretation, a thing or event that has significance for some interpreter. It can stand for some object for this interpreter, signify an action to be performed, arouse in the interpreter a feeling or emotion, or combine two or more of these functions.'

It would be possible to state that one has to understand and correctly interpret the signs in order to decipher or determine their meaning. This is especially so in a dramatic text because in a play there 'can be no direct comments by the author on the meaning of an

action, a situation, an expression, a gesture, and so on. If made by a character, such comments are likely to be very awkward' (Brooks and Heilman 1961: 25).

According to Peirce, the principle of interpretation stipulates that 'a sign is something knowing which we know something more' (quoted in Eco 1986: 2). In other words, the sign is a correlation between expression and content, or, in semiotic terms, between *signifier* and *signified*. The signified is the reality or meaning which is signified, while the signifier is the visible phenomenon which signifies the meaning. An example of a signifier would be the word 'chicken'. The reality signified by the word is the actual chicken.

However, as Bate (2002: 95) notes, the relationship between signifier and signified is arbitrary because it is largely determined by human beings. For example, the 'reality' signified by the word 'chicken' might change depending on the context. Since there is a difference between denotative and connotative meaning, to say 'chicken' refers to the actual chicken is to give the signifier a denotative meaning. However, connotatively 'chicken' could signify 'coward'.

## **9.2 Interpreting the Sign**

We are of the view that understanding the nature and context of the sign is therefore indispensable to the process of semiosis which, according to Peirce, is 'an action, or influence, which is, or involves, an operation of *three* subjects, such as a sign, its object, and its interpretant, this tri-relative influence not being in any way resolvable into an action between pairs' (quoted in Eco: 1). By interpretant Peirce means the meaning of the sign (Martin and Ringham 2006: 107).

While one of the key objectives of this study is to determine how culture affects interpretation of meaning, it is by no means a prescription of how to accurately interpret every dramatic text in terms of the author's *intent*. This is because, even when one is conversant with the cultural orientation of the dramatist or a particular dramatic

discourse, that is no assurance that one will interpret a dramatic text, or any part thereof, exactly according to the dramatist's intended meaning.

What this study seeks to do, however, is to explore how far the knowledge of, or sharing of, the dramatist's cultural orientation can go in helping to determine the dramatist's 'original intent'. This, in part, is largely due to the fact that, while some textual portions can only have one interpretation which corresponds to the dramatist's intent, others, indeed most, are subject to a variety of interpretations. We need, in this regard, to distinguish between what might be called 'culture-specific' and 'nonculture-specific' signs. In other words, knowing that a particular sign is specific to a particular culture which determines its interpretation helps to get close to the dramatist's intended meaning. For example, in Soyinka's play *Death and the King's Horseman* the significance of the conflict can only be fully understood in the context of Yoruba religious ritual. The play is based on an actual event which happened in Oyo, an ancient Yoruba city of Nigeria, in 1946. The colonial administrator, Simon Pilkings, is a well-meaning and sincere man who intervenes to prevent a ritual suicide of the Yoruba chief Elesin. The sacrificial suicide is demanded upon the death of the Yoruba king (Soyinka 1975).

To Pilkings, the suicide is illegal and must be stopped. To his surprise, however, Elesin is not happy to be stopped from committing suicide because to him the death was necessary and righteous. Pilkings, in other words, cannot understand the essence of the Yoruba cultural practice of ritual suicide. However, to understand the nature of the conflict explored by Soyinka in the play, we need to go beyond Pilkings' perception and instead look at the issue from the perspective of the Yoruba or, more specifically, Elesin.

The conflict between Pilkings and Elesin and the differences in the interpretation of the 'suicide' as a sign is reflected in the following dialogue between them which occurs in a prison cell where Elesin is thrown after being prevented from committing suicide (Soyinka 1975: 61-2):

*PILKINGS: You seem fascinated by the moon.*

*ELESIN (after a pause): Yes, ghostly one. Your twin-brother up there engages my thoughts.*

*PILKINGS: It is a beautiful night.*

*ELESIN: Is that so?*

*PILKINGS: The light on the leaves, the peace of the night...*

*ELESIN: The night is not at peace, District Officer.*

*PILKINGS: No? I would have said it was. You know, quiet...*

*ELESIN: And does that mean peace for you?*

*PILKINGS: Well, nearly the same thing. Naturally there is a subtle difference...*

*ELESIN: The night is not at peace ghostly one. The world is not at peace. You have shattered the peace of the world for ever. There is no sleep in the world tonight.*

*PILKINGS: It is still a good bargain if the world should lose one night's sleep as the price of saving a man's life.*

*ELESIN: You did not save my life District Officer. You destroyed it.*

*PILKINGS: Now come on...*

*ELESIN: And not merely my life but the lives of many. The end of the night's work is not over. Neither this year nor the next will see it. If I wished you well, I would pray that you do not stay long enough on our land to see the disaster you have brought on us.*

*PILKINGS: Well, I did my duty as I saw it. I have no regrets.*

*ELESIN: No. The regrets of life always come later.*

It is apparent that, whereas to Pilkings the suicide is a crime that needs to be stopped, to Elesin it is a necessary, sacrificial, redemptive ritual which must happen for the sake of the Yoruba nation. In other words, Elesin's perception is culture-specific, where Pilkings' is more 'universal'. Thus, whereas Elesin operates within the dictates of Yoruba religious ritual, Pilkings operates within the confines of the British colonial law.

We need to be aware that one sign can mean one thing to one community or culture, and quite another to another community or culture. Culture-specific signs play an important

role in the conveyance of the message between the sender and the receiver. Culture-specific messages are what Bate refers to as 'culture texts'. Hence, to him culture is 'a vast network of culture texts each of which carries a message' (96). Pilkings, in this regard, fails to understand the Yoruba culture text, and therefore fails to see the 'truth' of Elesin's argument. His British cultural upbringing blinds him to the realities of Elesin's world. On the contrary, Elesin's fellow Yorubas generally understand his attempted ritual suicide essentially because they share his culture. It is worth noting that there is no universally accepted position on what circumcision signifies. In some cultures such as that of the Jews circumcision is a religious sign meant to show commitment to God. It was, according to the Bible, a token of the covenant between God and the Jews.

In Genesis 17: 9-10, the Bible says:

And God said unto Abraham, Thou shalt keep my covenant therefore, thou, and thy seed after thee in their generations. This is my covenant, which ye shall keep, between me and you and thy seed after thee in their generations. This is my covenant, which ye shall keep, between me and you and thy seed after thee: Every man child among you shall be circumcised. And ye shall circumcise the flesh of your foreskin; and it shall be a token of the covenant betwixt me and you (The Holy Bible, Authorised King James Version, 1983: 7).

By contrast, to the Maasai of East Africa, circumcision is a rite of passage, marking successful transition from childhood into adulthood for both male and female. Thus, while for the Jew circumcision was supposed to be done on the eighth day after birth, for the Maasai it should only be done when one is a grown boy or girl on the threshold of adulthood. Tepilit Ole Saitoti, a Kenyan Maasai, recounts what his father said to explain circumcision to him (Saitoti 2004: 73):

Tepilit, circumcision means a sharp knife into the skin of the most sensitive part of your body. You must not budge; don't move a muscle or blink. You can only face one direction until the operation is completed. The slightest movement on your part will mean you are a coward, incompetent and unworthy to be a Maasai man... The pain you will feel is symbolic. There is a deeper meaning in all this. Circumcision means a break between childhood and adulthood. For the first time

in your life, you are regarded as a grownup, a complete man or woman. You will be expected to give and not just to receive. To protect the family always, not just to be protected yourself. And your wise judgment will for the first time be taken into consideration. No family affairs will be discussed without your being consulted.

The interpretation of circumcision to the Jew and the Maasai, then, is culture-specific. This leaves little room, if any, for a different interpretation. In other words, if you come across a circumcised Maasai man, you will assume the circumcision was done when he was considered grown enough to transition into adulthood, and that it was done for no other reason than to signify the transition. Bate (2002: 82) also notes the different meanings of circumcision among different cultures:

Male circumcision is quite a common practice yet its meaning differs from group to group. For some like the Jews it is done at birth and its cultural meaning is to do with identity and belonging to the Jewish race. For other societies like the English, it is done at birth for health reasons. For some South African societies like the Xhosa and Sotho it is done around the time of puberty during ritual initiation and is the principal sign of manhood so that without it one remains a boy. For others like the Zulu it is never done.

Be that as it may, theories of interpretation range from those that restrict interpretation to the author's intention on the one hand, to those that argue that signs cannot be interpreted in a variety of ways. Eco perceives the two extremes as  $x$  and  $y$ : 'Let us say that at the extreme  $x$  stand those who assume that every text (be it conversational utterance or a poem) can be interpreted in one, and only one, way, according to the intention of its author. At the extreme  $y$  stand those who assume that a text supports every interpretation (Eco 1986: 3). However, as Eco (3) is quick to note, 'nobody would *literally* endorse' extreme  $y$ . In other words, the general trend of principles of interpretation is to gravitate towards theories on the  $x$  extreme. This is not to say, of course, that it is always possible to determine the 'author's intent'.

One of the key elements of a sign, as Eco observes, is that it does not just stand for something else but it is also ‘something that can and must be interpreted’ (46). In other words, interpretability is one of the characteristics of a sign, enabling us to determine what is signified by the sign. As Bate (93) argues, signs ‘signify a certain reality’. He further argues that a word is one of the most important signs. He adds art forms to the list of signs because they ‘stand for the reality of some kind of transcendental or emotional cultural experience’ (93). His list of signs also includes what he calls ‘recreation forms’ such as actors in the theatre or movies who stand for someone else. The list also includes ‘cultural forms’ such as traditions, customs and rituals, as well as ‘religious signs’ such as the cross and the Koran. All these signs as listed by Bate are relevant to this study. For example, it can be argued that the attempted ritual suicide of Elesin referred to earlier is an example of a cultural sign, whereas the characters in the plays to be analysed are recreation signs.

The ‘reality’ signified by signs is largely culturally and contextually determined. This study agrees with Bate when he argues: ‘It is the human subject in culture that gives meaning to signs.’ In other words, signs do not have any meaning except as assigned to them by human beings – who in turn are influenced by their cultural orientation or perception. Bate supports this position: ‘It is our culture and its framework of meaning which develops our sign systems’ (95).

According to Peirce (96-7), the human mind tends to work in three particular ways to develop sign systems. First, through what he calls icons (or signs of resemblance). The icon is a sign which ‘looks like’ the sign it signifies, such as the statue. Second, through the index (signs based on causality). In this type of sign, the relationship between the signifier and signified is not based on resemblance but causality. Thus, for example, a tomb is a sign of death, but it does neither resembles death nor the dead person. In much the same way as the index finger can point at a thing to signify it, the index is a sign that points to the thing it represents. Third, through convention (or symbol). These signs are completely arbitrary and their meaning is determined independently and arbitrarily by each group, depending on their cultural perception.

### 9.3 Types of Sign

For the purpose of this study, we shall draw a broad distinction between verbal and non-verbal signs. This is because communication can either be verbal or non-verbal. In other words, the characters in a play can communicate through words, which are usually in the dialogues, monologues or soliloquies, or through actions such as gestures.

Asides are important signs because quite often they ‘denote a character’s real thoughts as contrasted with what he says in his regular speeches’ (Brooks and Heilman 33). Similarly the soliloquy plays an important role in enabling us to know the psychological state of a character. Brooks and Heilman (35) indicate that the soliloquy may be used skillfully ‘to analyze an individual’s state of mind or awkwardly to convey information (that is, for exposition) which the author is not skillful or conscientious enough to present in more dramatic terms’. Thus, for example, the soliloquy by Jero at the start of Soyinka’s play, *The Trials of Brother Jero*, gives us an insight into Jero’s character and backstory as well as the exposition of the play.

The characters, in order to communicate, do so mostly through dialogue, gestures, signals, movements, and even silence. The world of the characters is defined within the context of speech and silence, movement and stillness. In other words, when the character is not speaking, they are silent; and if they are not moving, they are still. However, since communication is facilitated by signs, the signs by which the characters communicate are not just in the words they say, but as much in their silence, movement and stillness. In other words, a character who is silent might still be communicating through gestures, postures, signals, stillness and movement. For example, a character who remains silent while being addressed by another might be communicating any of several signs, depending on the context.

Silence as a sign in dialogue might mean, among others:

- (i) I am not interested in what you’re saying.
- (ii) I am too tired to talk to you.
- (iii) What you’re saying is boring.

- (iv) I don't want to talk to you.
- (v) I am still trying to figure out what you're saying.
- (vi) What you're saying is offensive.
- (vii) I don't understand your language.

It is therefore necessary for the reader of a dramatic text to see beyond what the characters as interactants see in their dialogue and actions. Thus, the reader is not only interested in the dialogue of the interactants, but also their physical constitution, gestures, postures, facial expressions, actions and reactions, movements and stillness, the props and scene content, as well as their costumes.

Quite often two or more signs in a dramatic text complement each other to convey meaning to the reader or character. For example, mean characters may communicate their 'mean-ness' through the words they utter, their actions, facial appearance, posture, gestures, mime and even costume. That is why, for the reader, it is important to understand the signs in the dialogue as well as in the stage directions of the script. Stage directions, as Roberts and Jacobs (2007: 1266) note, 'are the playwright's instructions about facial and vocal expression, movement and action, gesture and "body language," stage appearance, lighting, and similar matters'. Cuddon (1991: 915), on the other hand, defines stage directions thus: 'Notes incorporated in or added to the script of a play to indicate the moment of a character's appearance, character and manner; the style of delivery; the actor's movements; details of location, scenery and effects.'

Any semiotic analysis of a dramatic text must pay close attention to the dialogue because a lot of information is borne by the dialogue. Dialogue helps us understand the antecedents of the play as well as 'current' events. It also helps us understand characters and the motives and motivation behind their words and actions. In addition, it drives the story forward. Dialogue is more important than any other element of the dramatic text. Hence Brooks and Heilman (1961: 11) state:

[D]ialogue is of tremendous importance in drama. For language is perhaps our richest and most subtle means of significant expression....there can be no question that the legitimate drama is primarily an auditory art and that the

dialogue is its primary element. For drama, therefore, costumes, setting, and even acting are, finally, secondary. It is the word which is primary here; and this fact may explain why a good play retains so much of its dramatic power even when merely read in the study or the classroom.

Dialogue is one of the major elements of the text, which in turn is one the literary aspects of the drama genre. The other literary aspects of drama are language, characterisation, plot, structure, point of view, tone, symbolism, and theme.

#### **9.4 Non-Verbal Signs**

Dialogue, as verbal communication, is complemented by non-verbal communication. Condon and Yousef give a comprehensive list of forms of non-verbal communication:

...hand gestures, eye contact, posture and stance, facial expressions, odors, clothing hair style, walking behavior, interpersonal distance, touching, architecture, artifacts, graphic symbols, preference for specific tastes, arts and rhetorical forms, somatypes of bodies, vocal signs, color symbolism, synchronization of speech and movement, thermal influences, cosmetics, drum signals, vocal inflections, smoke signals, factory whistles, police sirens, time symbolism, timing and pose, and silence (quoted in Chen and Starosta 1998: 88).

Chen and Starosta (1998) divide non-verbal forms of communication into four categories: kinesics, proxemics, paralanguage and chronemics.

##### **9.4.1 Kinesics**

Kinesics is the study of body movements and activities in human communication – what is sometimes called body language. In the dramatic text, body language is indicated in the stage directions. Kaul (1998) uses the term body sport for body language. He makes an insightful observation on body language:

Communication takes place voluntarily almost all the time. The non-verbal manifestation of what we wish to convey to the receiver is evidenced in the manner we walk, talk, and position our hands. This can be defined as *body sport* played unconsciously by the body. It is a solitary game which knows no rules and

over which one has no control – not even the individual who plays it. If you as an observer, note carefully and minutely the various styles of walking, talking and positioning of hands you will be able to read a language which, though silent, speaks volumes about the individual... Body sport, by itself, has the capacity to connote whether an individual has a positive or a negative personality (1998: 79-80).

Kaul gives examples of some forms of body sport and what they mean:

Scratching of the head when talking to the other interactant is indicative of the fact that the individual is perplexed at the course of events. He would like them to be sorted out as they have already proved to be a cause of nagging discomfort. The stroking of the chin indicates that ideas discussed in the course of the interaction are being pruned and given due consideration. Issues under discussion would not be left at the embryonic stage but would be taken to their logical conclusion as more and more thought is being given to them (1998: 93).

Kaul also comments on styles of walking as signs by which a person's personality may be judged (98):

Walking with his hands in his pocket has a number of indications. If it is done on rare occasions, in public, it could be the desire to impress. On the other hand, if it becomes a characteristic feature it reveals that the individual is secretive, shy and withdrawn. This pose narrates a tale of its own revealing many aspects of the personality of the individual. The interactant could either be depressed when he is walking with his hands in pocket or he could be angry. If he is depressed, his walk would be disorganised and the head bowed down. However, if he is angry, it could and in most causes does cause him to kick an imaginary object – a symbolic gesture through which he gives vent to his anger.

However, there are in fact two types of body language: the voluntary and the involuntary, as demonstrated by Kaul. While we do not control some forms of body language, there are others which we control and produce consciously and knowingly. For example, some hand gestures. In France, when a raised forefinger is shaken forward and back, it means,

‘Watch out.’ Or, when the fingers are clapped once against the thumb, it means, ‘Shut up’ (Calbris 1990: 2-3)! These gestures are by no means involuntary. They have become conventional expressions whose meaning is known and can therefore be used to convey a message. Facial expressions, eye contact and hand gestures are perhaps the most common types of non-verbal communication. They may be used to express feelings, attitudes, intentions and mood, among others. Sometimes hand gestures and facial expressions might be combined with words as a reinforcement of meaning.

Touch is another important form of non-verbal communication. The study of how touch is used in communication is called *haptics*. The message conveyed through touch depends on a number of factors, including the relationship between the person who touches and the person touched, as well as the mood at the time of the touch. Other factors include the location of the touch and the cultural setting (Chen and Starosta 1998). Dramatic texts are generally characterised by the use of body language on the part of characters as interactants. Hand gestures, postures, stances, touching, and all manner of body language are therefore critical to the interpretation of meaning in a dramatic text.

In modern African theatrical performances, song, dance and mime are commonly used as expressions of messages. Dance and mime involve body language and are signs in themselves. Some texts do have songs and provide directions for dance and mime. For example, Ngugi’s *I Will Marry When I Want* (1982) is characterised by song, dance and mime. In fact, Ngugi notes in *Decolonising the Mind* (1986: 58) that the three forms were ‘more dominant than words’ in telling the story of *I Will Marry When I Want*.

#### **9.4.2 Proxemics**

Proxemics is the study of how human beings and animals use space in the communication process. Hall, who was the first scholar to systematically study proxemics, identifies three types of space: fixed-feature, semi-fixed feature, and informal space (Chen and Starosta 95).

- (i) *Fixed-Feature Space*: This refers to unmovable structural arrangements around us such as houses or bridges.
- (ii) *Semi-Fixed Feature Space*: This refers to the arrangement of movable objects that we only move when there is need. For example, chairs and desks in a conference room or classroom.
- (iii) *Informal Space*: This refers to the distance between the interactants in communication. All cultures have conventions on what they consider to be a violation of personal space. How close can one get before one violates another interactant's private space. Thus, for example, if one says to another person, 'Leave me alone,' while standing fifty metres away, the receiver of the message will not feel any immediate danger. However, if one says the same words while closing in on the receiver of the message, or while standing only a few metres away, the utterance might mean an immediate threat. While proxemics is more pronounced in the semiotics of the theatre, since the actors have to be constantly in motion on stage, it is nonetheless a factor in the semiotics of drama. It is always important to be wary of what the dramatic text says about the space between characters in relation to their actions and words.

### **9.4.3 Paralanguage**

This is the study of voice or the use of vocal signs in communication and includes all the sounds we produce with our voices that are not words. As is the case with proxemics, paralanguage is more pronounced in theatrical performances. However, in the case of the dramatic text the application is only in the context of the stage directions. In other words, the playwright might indicate the tone, quality or pitch or voice in the stage directions. For example, the stage directions might indicate that the character has raised or lowered his or her voice. A raised voice, which might in effect constitute a shout, might mean the character is angry. On the other hand, a voice lowered to a whisper might indicate fear or conspiratorial communication.

Paralanguage or paralinguistic cues also include what Trager calls *vocal segregates* (Chen and Starosta 98) – that is, the sounds or noises produced by the voice that seem not to serve any purpose apart from interfering with the flow of speech. For instance, sounds

like ‘Er,’ ‘hm,’ ‘I mean,’ ‘well,’ *inter alia*. Admittedly the vocal segregates are associated more with spoken conversation rather than dialogue, because dialogue differs from conversation in a number of ways. One of the differences between conversation and dialogue is that, while the former flows naturally and might even be extravagantly repetitive, dialogue tends to be controlled and compact. Thus, dialogue avoids vocal segregates, except where they are included for dramatic effect.

African speech ideosyncrasies are partly characterised by vocal segregates that are peculiar to Africa, although some are of universal character. This study, therefore, recognises the need to be wary of vocal segregates and other forms of paralanguage in the modern African dramatic text. For example, in Ngugi’s play *I Will Marry When I Want* (1982: 4) Wangeci, Kiguunda’s wife, says to the Drunk who comes to her door calling out to her husband:

Go away and drink that poisonous stuff at the bar!

You wretch!

Has alcohol become milk?

Auuu-u!

Have you no shame urinating there?

The expression ‘auuu-u!’ is peculiar to the play’s African context and might here stand for disgust and surprise.

#### **9.4.4 Chronemics**

This is the study of how we use time in communication. For example, the statement, ‘I will be back soon’ might be interpreted in a variety of ways by different people depending on their cultural orientation. In some cultures, if you say, ‘We shall meet at mid-day’ the reaction of the recipient of the message might depend on their cultural orientation. In some cultures that statement means *exactly* mid-day. In others, it might mean *around* mid-day. Hall puts this difference in time perception in context by distinguishing between what he terms *monochronic-time-oriented cultures* and *polychronic-time-oriented cultures* (Chen and Starosta 1998). In the former, time is treated as something fixed in nature which must be controlled and strictly followed, while

in the latter time is perceived as something less tangible in which many things can be done simultaneously.

Citing Victor, Chen and Starosta summarise the characteristics of monochronic and polychronic time orientations as follows (101):

[I]n monochronic time-oriented cultures (1) preset schedules dominate interpersonal relations; (2) appointment times are rigid; (3) people handle one task at a time; (4) breaks and personal time dominate personal ties; (5) time is inflexible and tangible; (6) personal time and work time are clearly separated; and (7) organizational tasks are measured by activities per hour or minute. In contrast, in polychronic-time-oriented cultures (a) interpersonal relations supercede preset schedules; (b) appointment time is not inflexible; (c) people handle many tasks simultaneously; (d) personal ties dominate breaks and personal time; (e) time is flexible and fluid; (f) personal time and work time are not clearly separated; and (g) organizational tasks are measured as part of overall organizational goal.

As African societies are generally polychronic-time-oriented, the position of this study is that this factor should not be ignored when analysing the semiology of the modern African dramatic text.

## **9.5 Perspectives on Interpretation**

Theories of interpretation are critical to the study. There is a relationship between semiotics and hermeneutics as both deal with meaning.

### **9.5.1 Validity of Interpretation**

The interpretation of any sign can be valid or invalid depending on the interpreter. Validity of interpretation means the interpreter's range of interpretations of the text is limited. Hirsch (1967: 10) says: 'Validity of interpretation is not the same as inventiveness of interpretation. Validity implies the correspondence of an interpretation to a meaning which is represented by the text.'

This study stands on the premise that validity of interpretation is not possible without due consideration of the cultural factors of the text. Thus, for example, an interpretation of Nigerian playwright John Pepper-Clark's tragic play, *Song of a Goat* that ignores the culture-specific signs of the play cannot be valid. Similarly, reading a Sophoclean tragedy like *Antigone* as if its cultural signs are the same as those of *Song of a Goat* would inevitably lead to an invalid interpretation.

### **9.5.2 Authorial Irrelevance (Semantic Autonomy)**

Some hermeneutic theorists, such as the German Hans-Georg Gadamer, argue that the author is irrelevant to the process of interpretation. In other words, the reader does not need to consider the background of the author in the process of textual interpretation because, once the author writes, the interpretation should be left to each individual reader. In other words, the text is semantically autonomous (Hirsch 1967). This school of thought argues that it is up to the reader to determine the meaning of the text as the author does not and cannot determine meaning. This argument also means that every text yields to *any* interpretation from *any* reader. Gadamer, in fact, welcomes the prejudice to which the reader is vulnerable if allowed the freedom to decide the meaning of the text (Hirsch 1967).

The irrelevance of the author is the central idea of Roland Barthes' essay, 'Death of the Author,' first published in 1967 in the American journal *Aspen*, No 5-6. Barthes argues: 'We know now that a text is not a line of words releasing a single "theological" meaning (the "message" of the Author-God) but a multidimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash' (ICA Document, 1986: 38-9). He adds that 'the reader is the space on which all the quotations that make up a writing are inscribed without any of them being lost; a text's unity lies not in its origin but in its destination' (39). In other words, the meaning of a text lies not in the author, but in the reader, and the author and his or her background and culture is irrelevant to the process of interpretation.

This study, however, agrees with Hirsch that the author cannot be banished from their own work if the interpretation is to be valid (1967:5): ‘Whenever meaning is attached to a sequence of words it is impossible to escape an author... To banish the original author as the determiner of meaning was to reject the only compelling normative principle that could lend validity to an interpretation.’

### **9.5.3 Meaning and Significance**

Hirsch (1976) distinguishes between meaning and significance of the meaning. The term ‘meaning’, according to him, refers to the whole verbal meaning of a text. The term ‘significance,’ on the other hand, refers to the textual meaning in relation to a larger context, or a context beyond itself. In other words, the meaning as it is understood, evaluated and applied by the individual reader. According to this study, the significance of the text, or, more specifically, the dramatic text, is culture-related. In other words, this study is not only interested in the meaning of the text, but, more importantly, the cultural significance of the meaning.

### **9.5.4 Wilson’s Three Levels of Interpretation**

Wilson (1985) suggests that a dramatic text may be interpreted at three levels. First, the level of the *concrete reality*. The focus here is on what is actually happening and what the characters are saying to each other. Second, the level of the *poetic metaphor*. At this level the reading is concerned with the deeper or hidden meanings of words and actions as perceived at the concrete reality level – what Wilson calls the ‘allegorical associations’ (11). Third, the level of the *author’s fantasy life*. This is concerned with ‘whether aspects of the author’s psychology are partial determinants of the themes about which he writes and the way that his characters respond to the situations in which they find themselves’ (12). Metaphorical language, however, can have heavy cultural connotations, as in the case of figures of speech such as idioms. Similarly, delving into the author’s psychological motivations also means delving into their cultural motivations. In other words, if we consider the author’s prior experiences to be a factor in their writing then their cultural background is equally a factor.

It would appear that Wilson also subscribes to the idea that it is not only the author's background that matters but that of the audience as well. He observes (12):

The allegorical significance of a play depends partly upon the perceptions and prime concerns of the audience. The *avant garde* play *Waiting for Godot* deals explicitly with disappointed expectations but is variously interpreted according to the political climate prevailing in the country in which it is seen. Anglo-Americans usually interpret it religiously, but landless Algerian peasants are reported to have seen Godot as the oft promised but never delivered land reform, while Poles see it in terms of the national independence so long denied them. The play itself simply evokes an emotion, while the audience themselves provide the context.

While Wilson is here talking about a live audience watching a play on stage, his observations also apply to the reader of the play. In other words, our cultural experience can determine the *context* we give to the play. Our interpretation of a play's contents will therefore depend on the social and cultural context within which we encounter the playtext.

### **9.5.5 Elam's Concepts of Interpretation**

One of the seminal works critical to this study is Keir Elam's *The Semiotics of Theatre and Drama* (2002) which traces the history of theatrical semiotics from the 1930s onwards. It provides important guidelines to the semiotic analysis of dramatic texts and performance texts. In keeping with the tradition of differentiating between the dramatic and performance texts, Elam argues that while the reader of the dramatic text and the spectator (in a performance) construct the dramatic world in the same way, there is a difference in the semiotic considerations of the two: 'The reader is able to imagine the dramatic context in a leisurely and pseudo-narrative fashion, while the spectator is bound to process simultaneous and successive acoustic and visual signals within strictly defined time limits' (Elam 2002: 89).

In other words, while the reader only has the written word to contend with, the spectator has to contend both with what is *seen* and what is *heard*. The spectator has the advantage

of experiencing the *spectacle* of the play. The spectator might have read the text prior to watching the play, in which case he or she has the advantage of making comparisons between the signs in the dramatic text and in the performance.

Critical to the interpretation of the dramatic text is the concept of ‘*accessibility* of the constructed world to the real world’ (Elam 92).

Accessibility is usually defined as a relationship  $R$  between two worlds ( $W_1$ ,  $W_2$ ) such that one world may be conceived of in, or generated by, the other through certain simple changes (having, for example, the same set of individuals but with changed properties). Thus  $W_1 R W_2$  represents the accessibility of  $W_2$  from  $W_1$ : if  $W_1$  is a world comprising four individuals, three of them married, two of them fat and one long-haired, then a world  $W_2$  in which all four individuals are married, only one fat and none of them long-haired is accessible to  $W_1$ . Similarly, the state of affairs in  $W_1$  is conceivable in  $W_2$ , making it accessible in turn: in this case, the worlds are said to be *symmetrical*. It may be, however, that one world is accessible to another but not vice versa. Imagine a world  $W_x$  accessible to the actual world,  $W_o$ , from which it differs in a single respect: the property ‘married’ does not exist in it.  $W_o R W_x$  obtains, since  $W_x$  is conceivable in  $W_o$  on the basis of the removal of the qualification ‘married’ from the individuals affected;  $W_x R W_o$ , however, does not obtain since, the property ‘married’ not existing in  $W_x$ , a world  $W_o$  some of whose members are married cannot be generated. In this case, the worlds are said to be *asymmetrical* (the relationship of accessibility being one-way).

Applied to the reading and interpretation of the dramatic text, the concept of accessibility entails that there are two worlds – that of the reader’s real world and that of the dramatic text, which we shall call  $W_a$  and  $W_b$  respectively.  $W_a R W_b$  means  $W_b$ , or the world of the dramatic text, is accessible to  $W_a$ , the world of the reader. If both worlds are accessible to each other, then they are symmetrical; if only one world is accessible to, or can access, the other, then the two are asymmetrical.

The cultural factor is critical to the symmetry or asymmetry of the reader's (real) world and the text's (fictional) world. In other words, the reader must be conversant with the culture embedded in the world of the text, which in turn means familiarity with the world of the playwright. Thus, for example, if in  $W_a$  a black cat is a symbol of evil while in  $W_b$  it is a symbol of holiness, the two worlds are asymmetrical. However, if in both worlds the black cat symbolises evil, then the two are symmetrical. In the first scenario, the likelihood of misunderstanding and misinterpretation is high, whereas in the second there would be harmony in interpretation.

The process of interpreting signs in dramatic texts involves and entails relating the signs in the dramatic text to those in the real world. When reading historical plays, for example, we relate the characters, events and names of places in the play to those in real life. However, even what we perceive as the 'real' world is largely 'conditioned by the beliefs, fantasies, fears and wishes that we project onto it' (Elam 102). In other words, cultural orientation is a determining factor in the shaping of our 'real' world. Similarly, the world of the text is shaped by the playwright's cultural orientation.

## **10.0 Conclusion**

This chapter has largely been concerned with establishing the theoretical and conceptual framework within which the semiotic analysis of the texts shall be conducted. Of particular interest and relevance have been concepts and theories on semiotics in general, the semiotics of drama, as well as on culture, modern African drama, communication and interpretation. In the remaining chapters we shall analyse dramatic texts guided by the framework established in this chapter, starting with Kasoma's *Black Mamba Two*.

## CHAPTER FOUR: ANALYSIS OF *BLACK MAMBA TWO*

### 1.0 General Introduction

This chapter analyses *Black Mamba Two* by Kasoma (1979), within the framework of the theories and concepts discussed in Chapter Three. The chapter is the first of four analytical chapters.

### 2.0 Introduction

*Black Mamba Two* is largely influenced by historical events prior to and leading up to Zambia's independence. Kasoma acknowledges that the main source of information for the play is *Zambia shall be Free* (1962), an autobiographical work written by Zambia's first president and central character of the play, Kenneth Kaunda (Sumaili 1991: 91). Kasoma also acknowledges that the other sources of information for his play are *Black Government* by Kaunda and the Rev Colin Morris; *Zambia* by Richard Hall; and *The Rise of Nationalism in Central Africa* by Robert Rotberg (Etherton 1976: 35).

The play, however, is not a mere reflection of raw history. It is, on the contrary, a blend of historical fact and fiction. In other words, the play dramatises history. For example, in *Black Government* Kaunda narrates an incident which occurred at a café in Kitwe: 'It was in April 1957. I went to the counter and asked for sandwiches, but was told "boys are not served here". I tried to reason with the assistant, that all I wanted was service, but without success. The next thing I knew I was being thrown outside by fellow customers and 'a free for all' followed' (47). In *Black Mamba Two*, Scene Four, the incident is dramatised and includes Harry Mwaanga Nkumbula and verbal and physical exchanges that are not an exact reflection of the historical account. The scene also includes Constable Hantuba who is a fictional character.

The inclusion of Nkumbula in the play is however correct because Kaunda's account of the incident in *Zambia Shall be Free* does include Nkumbula (1962: 33-4):

This being the white area of Kitwe there were no African eating houses nearby. We drove to a café, having been told by our driver that this café would sell us

what we wanted, provided we did not demand to take our meal there; but he did not tell us that even to do that we had to stand by the door where an African servant could come and ask us what we wanted and could then go in to get us whatever we wanted. We went into the café to the counter and I asked for some sandwiches. In reply a young girl of about seventeen told me that ‘boys’ were not served at the counter. When I told her that I was not a ‘boy’ and all I wanted was a dozen sandwiches, she spoke to an elderly white woman who was apparently in charge. On asking me what I wanted, she repeated that ‘boys’ were not served at the counter. I repeated in my turn that I was not a ‘boy’. At this point I was dragged out of the café by my clothes by a European man who had already dragged Harry Nkumbula outside the café. This white man hit Harry Nkumbula and called him a cheap, spoiled nigger. Five other white men joined him in attacking us and we defended ourselves. White men and black men passing joined in the fight, and an apartheid type of brawl took place.

*Black Mamba Two* is part of a trilogy, the other plays being *Black Mamba One* and *Black Mamba Three*. While *Black Mamba Two* covers the political events in Zambia (then Northern Rhodesia) from 1948 to 1959, *Black Mamba One* focuses on the boyhood, youth and early maturity of Kenneth Kaunda, Zambia’s first republican president. ‘The play centres around President Kaunda’s close friendship with Simon Mwansa Kapwepwe, a powerful leader and for some years the Vice-President of Zambia. The play records a decade of colonial experience covering the Second World War’ (Etherton 1976: 34).

On the other hand, *Black Mamba Three* concerns itself with the split in the Harry Mwaanga Nkumbula-led African National Congress, leading to the formation of Kaunda’s faction, the Zambia African National Congress, the forerunner to the United National Independence Party (UNIP). The play also highlights the final stages of the struggle for Zambia’s independence leading up to, and culminating in, independence on 24 October 1964.

*Black Mamba Two* owes its title to the words of one John Gaunt, at one time a District Commissioner in the then Northern Rhodesia and one of the most outspoken and most powerful politicians in Northern Rhodesia. After comparing Julius Nyerere and Dr Kamuzu Banda of Nyasaland to Adolf Hitler, he said: ‘They tell us to come to terms with the black Nationalists. Pah! We might as well come to terms with a black mamba’ (*Black Government* 1960: 3).

### **3.0 *Black Mamba Two* as Contemporary African Drama**

Apart from the obvious fact that *Black Mamba Two* is written by an African, and targeted mostly at an African audience, the play exhibits the key characteristics of a modern African drama. The subject and themes, structure and plot, characterisation, and language, song and dance all point to the hybrid nature of the play – that is, it is a blend of western conventions of theatre and African traditional forms of artistic expression.

#### **3.1 Subject and Themes**

In terms of subject, *Black Mamba Two* is anchored on the fight against colonialism by Zambian nationalists especially in the decade leading up to Zambia’s independence. The historicity of the events in the play also ensures that the subject is associated with the Zambian (or African) colonial experience.

The themes are also reflective of the playwright’s African perspective. A few examples will suffice.

(a) *The deep-seated nature of racism during the colonial era.*

In his discussion with the Rev Colin Morris (1960), Kaunda captures the racist fibre of colonial Zambia, what was then known as Northern Rhodesia:

I am a “nationalist” living in a society that you White men call multi-racial, but it rejects me and my claims. I am regarded in my own country as a second class citizen. I ask you to look at this society and I ask all Europeans to look at it for once through the eyes of an African. We live in water-tight compartments. What do I mean by this? We find ourselves divided into four distinct residential areas: European, Asian, Eurafican and African....Every part of our ‘multi-racial’

society is conditioned by colour. When we are sick we are taken to separate hospitals in separate ambulances. When we sleep on a journey we must go to separate hotels. When we eat we must eat in separate cafes; when we want to enjoy ourselves we must go to separate cinemas (*Black Government?* 1960: 40, 46).

The play's pages overflow with the portrayal of the racism that polarised Northern Rhodesian society. From the opening scene, when we see the thoroughgoing racist, Captain Goodfellow, carried on a *machila*, to the closing scene, when the nationalists are paraded as prisoners (victims of the racist system), *Black Mamba Two* captures the extent to which human relations in Northern Rhodesia were defined and underpinned by racism.

(b) *The two-sided nature of racism*

Racism in colonial Africa was characterised by two sides: on the one hand, the oppressor, on the other, the oppressed. In other words, while the racial system disadvantaged, and was therefore despised by, Africans, it was appreciated by the white settler community, who benefited from it.

(c) *The colonialists' disregard for African leadership*

The colonial settlers did not have regard for African leadership, and this is obvious from the way Captain Goodfellow treats headman Chibesa Kunda and the African political leaders. Even ordinary whites have no regard for African leaders, as is exhibited by the behaviour of the waiter and other whites in the 'Whites Only' café in Kitwe.

The disregard for traditional leadership does not mean the British colonialists did not work with the chiefs and headmen. On the contrary the colonial administration was structured in such a way that the traditional leaders were used to indirectly enforce colonial rule. Boahen (1987: 59) lends weight to this view: 'At the local level, some of the imperial powers made use of existing traditional rulers. The British certainly did so, and even where none existed created them under their so-called system of indirect rule.'

### 3.2 Structure and Plot

The structure and plot of *Black Mamba Two* fall within the mold of the western tradition. There is rising action, falling action, and a resolution. The climax occurs when the nationalist leaders are arrested, and the resolution of the conflict between the forces of oppression and those of freedom comes when the nationalists are sent to prison.

### 3.3 Characterisation

The characters in the *Black Mamba Two* are not strange to an African readership. The characterisation therefore contributes to the creation of an African setting and context for the play. The African characters talk, behave and live like Africans. The villagers are believable characters, as are the nationalists and white settlers. Worth noting, however, is the fact that, apart from historical persons such as Kaunda, Nkumbula and Kalulu, other characters such as Chipayeni and Goodfellow are composite in nature.

### 3.4 Language

As is the case with most modern African plays, *Black Mamba Two* is characterised by the use of the English language. However, there is also use of African languages as well as code-switching and code-shifting. Code-switching occurs when a character switches from one language to another within the same utterance or sentence (See (f) below). Code-shifting, on the other hand, occurs when a character completely shifts from one language to another. A good example of a character who uses code-shifting is the clerk.

At times, he chooses to use Bemba, though broken, and other times, he shifts to the use of English, although this too is broken. In addition, he uses Chewa. The excerpt below, from Scene One, illustrates this point:

*CAPTAIN GOODFELLOW: Including those who should start paying tax this year (English).*

*CLERK: Kuwikapo wose na walya awaletampa ukosonka umusonko uno mwaka (Bemba).*

*HEADMAN: Nabashimakuka kumo? (Bemba)*

*CLERK (to Goodfellow): He say, even cooks, Bwana? (English)*

*CAPTAIN GOODFELLOW (frowning irritably): Cooks! What do we want cooks for? I have my own cooks already (English).*

*CLERK (to the Headman): Bwana anena kuti makuku ayo niya-nji? (Chewa)*

As the excerpt demonstrates, the Clerk shifts from Bemba to English then Chewa almost seamlessly.

Be that as it may, language use in the play's dialogue is at several levels:

- (a) Good English as used by the whites and the educated Africans such as the nationalists. For the Africans, however, this English is sometimes Africanised, though not broken, as is the case with the Clerk and Messenger.

A good example is when Kaunda says in the course of addressing the villagers: 'Now I have come to very important and heavy words. *The words that own this journey*' (Scene Three, 51; emphasis mine). The expression, 'The words that own this journey' is grammatical. However, no native speaker of English would ever speak like this. They might say something like, 'The words that are the reason for my coming.' However, Kaunda is speaking the way he would have spoken in the local language.

- (b) Broken English as used by the likes of Chipayeni.

For example, in the following statements by Chipayeni:

- (i) I am ready for insult the Gavinala imselufu. Why you finki you are? (I am ready to insult the Governor himself. Who do you think you are?)
- (ii) I am insult even King Joliji imselefu. You white people is all liars. You tell us if we fighting for you, we receiving gift from King. Dey say if we fight Germans, the King and Gavinala dey give us farms, money, ploughs, clothes and dose who education a bit to get good job for mines and Gavamant. Where is money, farms, and ploughs and mine jobs now? (I insult even King George himself. You white people are all liars. You told us that if we fought for you we would receive gifts from the King. You

said if we fought the Germans, the King and Governor would give us farms, money, ploughs and clothes, and that those with a bit of education would get good jobs in the mines and the Government. Where are the money, farms, ploughs and mine jobs now?)

- (c) Bemba as used by the villagers and nationalists such as Kapwepwe or the Headman.

For example: ‘Mukwai banono bashalamo. Abengi baliya kukuwila indalama shamusonko wine uyu kukalale.’

- (d) Broken Bemba as used by the clerk.

Below are two examples:

- (i) Kuwikapo wose na walya awaletampa ukusonka umusonko uno mwaka.
- (ii) Wose-fye upende tile wa-fwaya.
- (iii)

- (e) Chewa as spoken by the Malawian-born clerk.

For example, when the Clerk says to the Headman (38): ‘Bwana anena kuti...’

- (f) Hybrid forms of expression such as those blending English and local languages, as well as those blending local languages.

- (i) *Give him five fikoti pamatako.* (Goodfellow: this is a case of code-switching between English and the local language expression)
- (ii) *Nimwamene bachitila ma straka nama boycoti. Is because they read news papers from Russia. Muzamangidwa lelo.* (Hantuba’s words. ‘ma straka’ is an Africanised form of ‘strikes’, as ‘boycoti’ is of ‘boycot’. This is another case of code-switching.)

Another form of code-switching that is pertinent to this study is the type in which a character speaking in English decides to resort to a word or expression from an

African language. Kaunda, for example, chooses to use the word *bamwisa* (plural for *mwisa*) and *mwisa* instead of the English 'stranger' (Scene Three, 47). This is because *bamwisa* and *mwisa* more accurately and effectively communicate the emotions and discontent of the villagers.

In similar vein, Kaunda chooses to use the word *Kabengele* to refer to the period January to February, which is the wettest period of the rainy season (50). The word is more effective than using the term 'rainy season', particularly when we consider the context in which it is used. Kaunda attempts to demonstrate the oppression of the African people by the colonialists by narrating the story of Goodfellow and his cook. Goodfellow goes on a journey and decides to take both the cook and his pet dog along. However, he makes the dog sit with him in the front of the van while the cook is made to sit in the back.

It is in this context that heavy rains fall, as is characteristic in the month of *Kabengele*. Hence the use of the local word paints a more vivid picture of Goodfellow's cruelty than if an English equivalent were used. In reality, however, there is no exact English equivalent for *mwisa* and *kabengele*.

The language of the play is also characterised by the use of African proverbs by some characters. In Scene Three, two proverbs are used:

- (a) We were the foolish wooden spoon that got itself into the hot water.
- (b) The bad *musuku* tree causes all the other *misuku* trees to be called bad (50).

The proverbs are more appropriate and effective when used for an African audience, as is the case with the meeting between Kaunda and the villagers. The type of language used in *Black Mamba Two*, as well as choice of words by the characters, also reflects the nature of relationships between the characters. For example, Captain Goodfellow's language reflects not only his attitude to Africans, but also the fact that he holds a position of authority in the colonial government. Not only is his language harsh, it also reflects his arrogant and disrespectful attitude toward Africans regardless of their status in

life. On the other hand, the way the African characters speak to Goodfellow reflects, on one extreme, submissiveness and fear, and, on the other, subversion and sarcasm. However, the nationalists speak to the likes of Goodfellow with a confrontational and stubborn attitude.

The excerpt below provides some insight into the way in which the dialogue reveals the nature of the relationship between characters (Scene One, 39):

*CAPTAIN GOODFELLOW: Clerk!*

*CLERK: Sah!*

*CAPTAIN GOODFELLOW: The register. Call the register. What's the name of this village?*

*MESSENGER: Chibesa Kunda Bwana. [salutes] [Then pointing to the village headman] And dis is de village man, Bwana.*

*CAPTAIN GOODFELLOW [to the village Headman]: Are you the village Headman? [silence] I say [with gestures indicating the village] Are you the village Headman?*

*HEADMAN: E-e Kanabesa Mulopwe Bwana. (Yes, most respected Great One.)*

It is clear from the excerpt that Captain Goodfellow expects to be obeyed and revered by the Headman as well as his employees, the Clerk and Messenger. He has no regard for the Headman as a traditional ruler. He recognises only his own authority. On the other hand, the Africans fear and obey him without question.

The language used, however, reflects different types of relationship between the African characters. Older people, such as Harry Nkumbula, are addressed with more respect by the younger Africans.

### **3.5 Song and Dance**

Song and dance, accompanied by the African drum, are in the play used as a political tool by the African characters. The songs and dances serve a variety of social and political purposes. For instance, at the start of Scene One, when Captain Goodfellow arrives at

Chibesakunda village, the villagers welcome him with songs and dances. Some are songs sung by members of the African National Congress as a means of resistance to the colonial oppressor.

#### **4.0 Reading the Signs**

The signs of *Black Mamba Two* take a variety of forms.

##### **4.1 Properties**

The text contains a number of properties, or props, that make for interesting interpretation.

###### *(a) Machila*

Captain Goodfellow first appears on the scene, in Scene One, ferried atop a *machila*, a stretcher-cum-chair which, in African societies, is reserved for important personages, especially chiefs and kings. In general, ordinary citizens are only ferried on the *machila* when their dead bodies are being transported to the burial place. Thus, when Goodfellow uses the *machila*, it ceases to signify African authority.

On the contrary, it signifies Goodfellow's (and by extension the colonial authorities') disregard for traditional authority and an imposition of their own. It is, in effect, an affront to African culture. In addition, the *machila*, in this context, is a sign representing the colonial authorities' appropriation of traditional authority and symbols of power.

In the first place Goodfellow is not royalty. His decision to use the *machila*, in this context, is his way of demonstrating his total disregard for traditional structures of authority as represented by the Headman. This view is reinforced by his language, behaviour and general attitude toward the Headman, whom he humiliates by having him whipped with a sjambok in the presence of his subjects and family.

The *machila* in this context also serves as a reminder of the colonial master's imposition of power and legitimacy on the African people. The fact that the *machila* places the District Officer over the heads of the African carriers is a symbol of the power hierarchy in colonial Africa, reminiscent of the concept of 'the horse and its rider'. The African serves the colonial master who has the privilege of riding on the back of the oppressed. The practice of abusing the symbols of authority of the conquered peoples in order to legitimate an unpopular or illegitimate and oppressive regime underpins the conflicts in Soyinka's play *Kongi's Harvest* (1967).

Kongi's regime disregards the icons of Oba Danlola's traditional authority in the form of the royal drums and the yam. Kongi stops the royal drums from playing, both literally and figuratively, and is determined to take the place of the Oba in eating the yam at the traditional New Yam Festival. Thus Kongi appropriates the instruments of traditional culture and power. This is reflected not only in Kongi's appropriation of the New Yam Festival, but also of the Aweri Fraternity, which is the ultimate symbol of traditional wisdom and authority. In order to legitimate his regime, he decides to call his inner circle of leaders the Reformed Aweri Fraternity, giving the impression that it is not different from, but merely an improvement of, the traditional leadership structure. Kongi hopes to gain cultural and political legitimation. There is also a sense in which the *machila* stands for the desecration of sacred cultural icons by the colonial authorities. This largely contributes to the conflict of cultures in the play, and other African plays in which African cultural icons are desecrated.

In Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman* (1975), for example, Pilkings, who, like Goodfellow, is a District Officer, turns the attire of the *egungun* into fancy dress for himself and his wife, Jane. The couple dance while wearing the attire when they are found by Amusa, to whom the dress is sacred. As far as he is concerned, the attire stands for death, and he is bewildered to find the couple wearing it.

AMUSA:        *Mista Pirinkin, I beg you sir, what you think you do with that dress? It belong to dead cult, not for human being.*

*PILKINGS: Oh Amusa, what a let down you are. I swear by you at the club you know – thank God for Amusa, he doesn't believe in any mumbo-jumbo. And now look at you!*

*AMUSA: Mista Pirinkin, I beg you, take it off. Is not good for man like you to touch that cloth.*

*PILKINGS: Well, I've got it on. And what's more Jane and I have bet on it we're taking first prize at the ball. Now, if you can just pull yourself together and tell me what you wanted to see me about...*

*AMUSA: Sir, I cannot talk this matter to you in that dress. I no fit.*

Thus, to Goodfellow, the *machila* has no significance, in the same way that, to Pilkings, the *egungun* dress is of no significance. This disregard for traditional icons is extended to traditional leadership. Hence, Goodfellow disrespects and even humiliates Headman Chibesa Kunda, in much the same way as Kongi and Pilkings humiliate and disrespect Oba Danlola and Elesin respectively. The lack of respect also extends to 'sacred' places such as, in the case of *Black Mamba Two*, the *nsaka*, which is traditionally the place where the village elders sit to discuss important matters. It is where important decisions affecting the village are made.

However, Goodfellow, when he arrives in Chibesa Kunda's village, decides to do his 'business' from the *nsaka* (Scene One). The 'desecration' consists in the fact that, instead of using the *nsaka* to discuss matters that are for the good of the villagers, Goodfellow uses it to perpetuate an alien agenda – that of the oppressive colonial regime. The irony is that instead of being the sacred place where problems are solved, the *nsaka* now signifies, not only the intrusion of the colonial authority on traditional power structures, but also the disruption of the African cultural life.

The *machila* and *nsaka*, therefore, help us to interpret the undercurrent of cultural conflict in *Black Mamba Two*. The two, as signs, also help us to grasp the themes of the play, particularly those evolving around the clash of cultures and power structures. However, we are only able to detect and determine the nature of the relationship between the

*machila* and *nsaka* on the one hand, and what they signify, on the other, when we understand the cultural significance and meaning of the two icons. In other words, if we do not understand the *machila's* cultural significance, we will not see the fact that Goodfellow is appropriating a traditional instrument. We will only see a District Commissioner entering a village in grand style; or a man who is simply too tired or too lazy to walk. Similarly, if we do not understand the pre-eminence of the *nsaka* (or *insaka*) in the Zambian village set-up, we will not see Goodfellow's use of it as a violation, but merely as a gesture of goodwill on the part of the villagers.

(b) *Sjambok*

The *sjambok*, which also has symbolic value, largely signifies the cruelty of not only Goodfellow as District Commissioner, but, since Goodfellow is a composite character, also signifies the cruelty and inhumanity of the colonial system. Ultimately, however, it signifies the disruption of the cultural ethos of the colonised people.

The African traditional ethos demands respect for authority, especially when the bearer of the authority is elderly. Yet, in *Black Mamba Two*, Goodfellow exhibits nothing but utter disregard for Headman Chibesa Kunda and the authority and traditions he represents. As far as Goodfellow is concerned, traditional authority is subject to, and at the mercy of, colonial authority. More specifically, Chibesa Kunda, from Goodfellow's perspective, must bow to colonial authority; Chibesa Kunda's cultural values must equally be subject to western cultural values. Indeed, Goodfellow holds nothing but contempt for the culture which Chibesa Kunda represents, and of which he is steward.

Thus, when Goodfellow discovers, while running through the village tax register, that Chipayeni, a rebellious former Askari, has defiantly stayed away from the proceedings at the *nsaka*, he offloads his frustration and anger on the Headman (Scene One):

You fat pig! You said these were all the people there were in this village. What is that baboon [Chipayeni] doing there? (*stamping furiously*) I am not going to sit here all day long waiting for undisciplined baboons to come to answer the tax register. If you can't discipline your people, I will discipline you myself. (*to the*

*messenger*) Give him five *fikoti pamatako*. [Give him five strokes of the sjambok on the buttocks]

The Messenger promptly obeys the order, and the poor Headman 'is cruelly beaten and left lying in a sorry heap' (Scene One). The old man's humiliation is ruthless and total. Symbolically, however, the flogging of the Headman also represents the laceration of African culture with the sjambok of western cultural imperialism. The sjambok also represents the forceful disruption of Africa's cultural life. In addition, it represents the fact that resistance to western cultural disruption would be met with force.

(c) *Tax Register*

The register, to a large extent, plays the same role as the sjambok in the unfolding of the plot. It is, in effect, another form of disruption of the people's way of life – their cultural ethos and power structures. The tax register was used to impose hut tax on the people during colonial times. According to this tax system, which the villagers loathed, every able-bodied young man was required, by law, to pay tax. Only the old were exempted from paying it.

In order to raise the money required to pay the tax, however, the young men were forced to leave the village and work in the mines. This meant abandoning their families, wives and, ultimately, their way of life. This led to loss of cultural values, but it also meant the villages lost a valuable resource – the young men. One of the young people who, in the play, are said to have left the village to work on the mines is Chekapu Nkole, and when Goodfellow is given this information, he advises the Clerk to write 'Copper Mines' against the name of Nkole (Scene One, 39).

(d) *Drums*

The drum in *Black Mamba Two* is associated with African song and dance. Historically and culturally, African song and dance are characterised by the use of the drum. The drum, traditionally, is used for a variety of situations, including funerals, weddings, initiation ceremonies, *inter alia*. There is hardly a rite of passage which does not involve the use of the drum.

In *Black Mamba Two*, the drum is used in two diametrically opposed situations. In the first case, it is used to welcome Goodfellow to Chibesa Kunda's village. A group of villagers welcome Goodfellow outside the village with song and dance, while another group, gathered in ring-formation around the *nsaka* where Goodfellow will sit, are said to be 'clapping and chanting to the accompaniment of the drums' (Scene One, 39).

In this context, the drums signify Goodfellow's attempt to use traditional tools to legitimate the colonial narrative. He appropriates the pomp and ceremony that are associated with receptions accorded eminent persons. In other words, the 'welcome' is not genuine as the villagers are forced to do it. It is quite revealing that the song of 'welcome' sung by the villagers builds its lyrics around the *sjambok*. The villagers 'praise' the *sjambok* of the white man, using the local language, which he cannot understand. The English translation says:

The whiteman's *sjambok*  
Is very strong (and is constantly used)  
And when you see it  
It makes your heart sink  
(The heart) has sunk again today (chorus) has sunk  
has sunk again today  
has sunk  
has sunk again today  
has sunk.

It is important to note that, although the drum is in this case largely used to welcome Goodfellow, it is, to a lesser extent, also used to mock him. There is, therefore, a subtle use of the drum as a means of protest. In the second case, on the other hand, the drum is directly used as a tool of resistance to the oppressive system. In Scene Five (61), Nkumbula, Kaunda and Kapwepwe address a crowd of supporters outside a courtroom. When they are through, they depart, and the crowd, stirred up by the men's speeches, turns to traditional song and dance as a way of expressing their resistance to the system and support for the struggle.

Kasoma describes the situation thus (61):

The crowd breaks into commotion, with chest-beating and threats. Then they start drumming, singing, and dancing traditional dances. They dance the Ngoni war dance, and later the Siomboka; the first to *signify* the fight for independence, and the second the crossing of the colonial river to the land of Independence.(emphasis mine)

The playwright helps us to understand the contextualisation of the Ngoni war dance and the Siomboka dance. However, in order to have an even deeper and more accurate interpretation of the two dances as sign-vehicles, we need to first understand their cultural significance. The Ngoni war dance, like most African war dances, is intense, and is linked to the tribe's past military conquests. It is, therefore, a demonstration of pride and bravery, as well as of the determination to overcome the enemy. In the broader context of the play, therefore, the war dance signifies the determination of the oppressed people to triumph over the oppressor.

The Siomboka, on the other hand, is a dance associated with the Kuomboka ceremony of the Lozi people of western Zambia. During the ceremony the King of the Lozi, the Litunga, crosses the flood plain to dry ground. His people also cross the flood plain to the safety of dry ground. Hence the singing of the Siomboka. In the context of the play, therefore, the Siomboka signifies the African people's conviction that they would one day manage to cross the river of colonialism. The song and dance ultimately send an important message not only to the colonialist but also to the Africans who need to join the fight for freedom.

It is important to note that the interpretation of the drums, dance, and songs as sign-vehicles changes according to the context. In other words, the signs are transformable. This reflects the dynamic nature of cultural icons, and the fact that they can be abused and manipulated. Another example of a case where sign-vehicles change their meaning according to the context is that of the donation of food items. When Goodfellow completes the tax collection exercise, he demands food from the villagers. The villagers

bring hens, cocks, millet flour, and eggs, while the Headman himself brings a goat. Kasoma notes, in the stage directions, that the villagers give the food 'begrudgingly' (Scene One, 44).

The fact that the villagers give the 'gifts' against their wish is culturally significant because, according to African culture, visitors are supposed to be treated with the utmost respect and care. In other words, if Goodfellow were a welcome visitor, he would not have to demand food from the villagers. They would, on the contrary, bring the food voluntarily. The unwillingness of the villagers to feed Goodfellow and his entourage, therefore, is a serious indictment of him and the system he represents.

According to the culture of the villagers, in fact, what Goodfellow does amounts to theft, as does the tax collection. While addressing the villagers at Chibesa Kunda village Kaunda asks them whether Chipayeni, who was whipped and then sent to prison for defying Goodfellow, had done anything wrong: 'You all know our brother here, Mikaeli Chipayeni, has just returned from prison. What did he do? Did he kill a person? Did he steal *mwisa's* [colonialist's] woman? Did he steal *mwisa's* money or clothes' (Scene Three, 47)?

Amid the murmuring of the villagers, one of them shouts, 'It was in fact the *musungu* [white man] who was coming to steal our money, our hens and eggs' (47). These words are received with all-round laughter and 'shrill ululations' from the women (47). The ululations as a sign-vehicle, in this context, are a cultural form of expressing approval and support for what is being said. By contrast, when Kaunda finishes his address, the villagers demonstrate voluntary support for the cause of the African National Congress (ANC). Those with money buy the membership card, whereas without money pay for it in kind: 'they bring hens, eggs, millet in baskets, and beans and groundnuts in pots' (Scene Three, 54). Thus, whereas in the case of Goodfellow the food items stand for rejection of the colonial cause, in the case of Kaunda they stand for goodwill and the acceptance of the freedom cause. In other words, the sign value of the food items is transformed from one situation or context to the other.

(e) *Bicycle and Guitar*

Scene Two starts with Kaunda travelling on a lonely stretch of sandy bush road on his way to Chibesa Kunda village. He is pushing his bicycle up a hill and an old guitar is strapped across his back. It might appear contradictory that Kaunda is using the bicycle and guitar, which are products of western culture, while at the same time rejecting western rule or colonialism. However, there were some good things about western culture and civilisation that Africans could adopt. The bicycle and guitar, therefore, signify those icons of western civilisation and culture that African culture needed to absorb or co-exist with.

Any realistic fight for political freedom, as a matter of fact, needed to appropriate those aspects of western civilisation and culture that could be turned into tools for enhancing and strengthening the fight for freedom. In other words, the bicycle enhanced mobility, especially in the remote rural areas such as Chibesa Kunda village, and was therefore a means of reaching the oppressed people. Similarly, the guitar was a means by which Kaunda could spread the freedom message through music.

Another good example of appropriation of western cultural tools for the enhancement of the freedom struggle is the attainment of some degree of western education by the leaders of the freedom struggle. The more educated they became, the more enlightened they became, making them more effective leaders than those with no education. Much of this education, at that time, was obtained through mission schools. Hence, during the brawl at the 'Whites Only' café in Kitwe (Scene Four), one of the white patrons, a miner, shouts at Nkumbula: 'You can speak English all right, you *spoil mission kaffir*, but you are not literate enough to read the notice on the door that says: No dogs allowed' (emphasis mine).

#### 4.2 Characters

Most of the characters in *Black Mamba Two* represent and are bearers of cultural values. This is especially so for the African characters, whose personality, names, beliefs,

utterances and actions are epitomic of the African cultural value system. We shall look at a few of them.

(a) *Chibesa Kunda*

Chibesa Kunda is the custodian of African cultural values and norms. His humiliation at the hands of Goodfellow and his agents, therefore, constitutes a violation of African cultural values. However, Chibesa Kunda also represents a vanquished value and power system. This is evident in two ways. First, he does not command respect from Goodfellow and the colonial system. Thus, apart from being afraid of Goodfellow, he addresses him as 'Bwana' (used to address a person senior or superior to oneself), the same term the Clerk and Messenger use to address Goodfellow, who is their 'boss' (39). Similarly, and perhaps more revealingly, the Headman addresses Goodfellow as 'Kanabesa Mulopwe Bwana' (39), which Kasoma translates as '...most respected Great One' (39).

Clearly, Chibesa Kunda recognises the fact that his authority and power as a leader of his people has been usurped by the colonial authorities, whose only interest is to strengthen the western cultural hegemony. The Headman, like his people, has therefore become emasculated. He is, in effect, a signifier of the emasculation of the African people and their culture. It is therefore not surprising to see him, in the opening scene of the play, 'preparing the *nsaka* with some villagers' (37). He would like to ensure that the preparations are thorough and of a standard acceptable to the 'bwana'.

What makes Chibesa Kunda's situation worse is that even the Messenger and Clerk, who are supposed and expected to respect him as a traditional leader, have no regard for his authority. They equally do not hesitate to humiliate him, neither do they show any sympathy for his situation. Chibesa Kunda, therefore, helps us to understand the extent to which the colonial powers destroyed the traditional way of life in order to impose and buttress their own.

(b) *Clerk and Messenger*

The Clerk and Messenger are largely epitomic of people who, because of their attachment to the colonial system, became cultural misfits. These were agents of the system who betrayed their own people in exchange for the proverbial thirty pieces of silver. In other words, such people helped the colonial master to subdue the local people and their value system out of personal greed. Thus, for example, while the Clerk is associated with the tax register, the Messenger is associated with the sjambok, both of which, as earlier demonstrated, are tools of the oppressive system. Their initial appearance on the scene, wearing uniforms given to them by the colonial government (Scene One), is a clear reflection of their allegiance to an oppressive system.

The uniforms reflect the ambivalent nature of the personality of the Clerk and Messenger. The uniforms, which represent colonial authority, are a form of camouflage hiding the fact that the two are Africans and therefore part of the oppressed. In the colonial society, what mattered was skin colour, not a job in the government. The split personality of the Clerk, for example, comes to the fore when he is moved by Goodfellow's exploitation of the poor villagers, who are forced to bring the food items (Scene One, 44). When Goodfellow notices the sympathetic look in the face of the Clerk, he says to him: 'Why do you look at them so kindly? Are you, by any chance, in sympathy with the baboons?' The Clerk answers, 'I am not sure if I am not a baboon myself?'

(c) *Goodfellow*

Captain Goodfellow is a composite character whose personality and actions are epitomic of the general colonial system. Ironically named Goodfellow, he is cruel, inhuman, arrogant and disrespectful of African values and culture. He is the ultimate symbol of western attitudes and culture. His actions and words must therefore be interpreted from the perspective of western culture.

(d) *Lion*

From the perspective of African culture, the lion Kaunda encounters on his way to Chibesa Kunda's village at the beginning of Scene Two is no ordinary one. In order to

interpret its role accurately, we need to see it as a spiritual phenomenon and not an ordinary lion. The lion is a metaphorical representation of one of the dead Bemba chiefs. Kaunda, in fact, suspects that this might be the case, as is demonstrated by his words when the lion confronts him:

It might be one of the departed great ones...  
If you are one of the great chiefs;  
If you are Mubanga Chipoya, Kapalakasha;  
If you are Chitapankwa;  
If you are Nkole-Mfumumu – let your son pass.  
Let your son go to do your bidding.  
To free this land, the land you left your children,  
From the hands of foreign vultures.  
Then your bones and your names  
Will be honoured when we your children  
Are able to stand erect.  
Heads high with the dignity and pride of  
Free people.  
Let me pass, let your son pass.

Kaunda offers the lion some millet flour on a plate from his provisions. The lion eats and does not attack him; but it does not move either, and only runs off to let him pass when he ‘lifts the bicycle as if to cross a stream’ (46). Later, when Kaunda narrates his encounter to the villagers, the Headman has no doubt that the strange lion was Makumba, one of the dead Chitimukulus (kings). The Headman adds that Makumba was welcoming Kaunda. ‘You have the spirit of the Great Departed Ones. You are blessed. Your work shall go far, my son. Keep going’ (51). These words are accompanied by an act of cultural significance: he spits on the ground, touches the ground with both hands and then lifts them heavenwards. What all this suggests, in the larger context of the play, is that the ancestors of the Bemba people are in support of the freedom struggle, and for that reason Kaunda and his colleagues can be sure of victory. It is imperative to note that ancestors are believed to play a significant role in the affairs of the living in the traditional African

context. When ancestors die, they still watch over the living, giving them protection and guidance.

This is significant in several ways. First, it does mean, in the context of *Black Mamba Two*, that the dead ancestors are on the side of the freedom fighters; two, that the ancestors will add spiritual power to the fight against oppression; three, that victory is assured because, while the oppressor might manage to defeat the living, he cannot defeat the opposition from the grave; four, that even the ancestors are concerned about the oppressor's desecration of the land and its culture.

However, it is important to note that the play's account of Kaunda's encounter with the lion is highly fictionalised and idealised, not by Kaunda, but by Kasoma. Kaunda's own account does not include the names of dead chiefs; neither does it include the act of feeding the lion with millet. This is what he says of the encounter (1962: 53-4):

As I pushed my bicycle slowly I heard some noise from my left and then saw just about five feet in front of me a big lizard running faster than I had ever known lizards to run and close on its tail a big snake. I applied my brakes firmly and threw my bicycle down, but by the time I had done this the two had already gone. I started going on, more dragging myself than pedaling. I had gone about a mile from this place when I began to go uphill. To make matters worse, there was far too much sand to be able to ride and just after a bend, I saw from a distance of about a hundred yards what looked like a big monkey. It jumped from the north bank on the road and had obviously not seen me. The time must have been about eleven in the morning. It stood still for a moment or two and then moved on to the middle of the road. It quickly took a glance in both directions and it saw me and I realised immediately that my four-legged friend was no monkey, but a lion. To my great surprise the fear that had been haunting me quickly gave way to a feeling of strength and boldness. The beast stared at me as I advanced towards it. I must have been about twenty yards from it when I stopped. It continued to stare at me without making the slightest movement. I rang my bicycle bell and shouted but it still stood still and stared at me. It was of a fine brown colour and the mane

showed clearly that it was full grown. I took my cycle pump and hit almost every part of my bicycle but the animal did not even wink as far as I could see. I don't know why, but all of a sudden I lifted my heavily laden bicycle as if to cross a stream without a bridge and waved it over my head with both my hands. This was too much for the King of Beasts; he made one leap and disappeared as quickly as he had come.

We can only guess at why Kasoma exaggerates the encounter by adding a spiritual or element to it. In part it could be because of the author's own desire to dramatise the story. Certainly it is more dramatic, if fantastic, to suggest that Kaunda speaks to the lion and feeds it with millet. By suggesting that the lion is an incarnation of one of the dead Bemba chiefs, however, Kasoma implies that the lion is harmless; that it is one of the dead chiefs merely expressing support for Kaunda's liberation efforts. In this regard then the lion is more of a signifier of the fact that victory is assured, since the lion is all-conquering.

On the other hand, we might argue that the idealisation of the encounter reflects the hero-worshipping nature of politics in Kasoma's time. In other words, it would appear this is the author's way of idolising and *lionising* Kaunda as a hero of Zambia's fight for freedom. This indeed appears to be the case especially when we consider the depth of his involvement in the politics of Kaunda's United National Independence Party (UNIP).

#### 4.3 *Language*

The language used, especially in dialogic contexts, to some extent reflects the cultural convictions of the characters or interactants. For example, when Kaunda addresses the villagers in Scene Three, he begins his speech with a culture-specific salutation: 'Mothers and fathers; brothers and sisters; sons and daughters of the soil' (47). In other words, such a salutation makes sense in the African cultural milieu where one considers every elderly person as 'mother' or 'father', and every person young enough to be one's child as 'son' or 'daughter'. One's peers are 'brothers' and 'sisters'.

The cultural consciousness on the part of Kaunda is very important to the success of the struggle because, by starting with such a ‘culturally correct’ salutation, Kaunda makes the villagers feel that he is one of them and that they are a part of the struggle. Goodfellow cannot use such ways of addressing the villagers, and even if he tried it would be to no avail because, as far as the villagers are concerned, he is only a *mwisa*, or stranger (47). The contrast is absolute: Kaunda is a brother, son, and father; Goodfellow is a *mwisa*. The sense of belonging to each other is reciprocated by the people, as is eloquently illustrated by the Headman’s address of Kaunda as ‘my son’ (51). Kaunda, in turn, says, ‘Thanks, my father’ (51). In the broader context, therefore, *mwisa* does not qualify to be addressed as brother, sister, father, mother, son or daughter. This is largely because the racially and culturally polarised colonial society, as exists in *Black Mamba Two*, cannot allow for such salutations.

This fact is demonstrated in Scene Four when Kaunda and Nkumbula are confronted by angry whites at the café in Kitwe. When Kaunda orders two sandwiches from the white girl serving at the counter, she responds in shock: ‘Boys are not served from the counter, you kaffir!’ Kaunda retorts, ‘I am not a boy. [*shows his beard*] Do boys in your country grow beards’ (55)? If one does not understand that this conflict is rooted in cultural conflict, one might think the two are merely being sarcastic to each other. However, this is a serious and historically accurate cultural conflict that is ultimately an epitome of the cultural conflict in the larger colonial society.

From the perspective of the girl, which is seasoned with cultural and racial bias, all African men are ‘boys’, regardless of their age. From Kaunda’s and Nkumbula’s perspective, on the other hand, the girl has no respect for elders, whom she should be addressing with the same respect with which she addresses elderly white men or her parents. Kaunda, however, does not address her as ‘daughter’ either. Instead, he addresses her as ‘my dear girl’ (55). The white girl vigorously objects to being addressed as ‘girl’, despite the fact that she is indeed a girl. Red with anger, she rants: ‘What? You... You... a kaffir addressing me as “girl”? GET OUT OF HERE YOU BLACK MAMBA!’ Thus, in the scheme of things, elderly African men are ‘boys’, but white girls

are 'ladies'. Similarly, as Goodfellow reminds Nkumbula at the police station, the Africans cannot address a white woman as 'woman', but only as 'lady' (57).

The white characters' disregard for age and customary practice when addressing or interacting with Africans is a key factor in the conflict around which the play evolves. It signifies, at a higher level, *mwisa's* disregard for the humanity and culture of the African people. The African people, therefore, are not only fighting for their land and culture, but also for their humanity.

## **5.0 Conclusion**

In this chapter we have analysed a number of sign-vehicles, especially as they relate to culture and the contents of the play. Some sign-vehicles are universal in nature, while others are culture-specific and can therefore only be interpreted in relation to their cultural context. Through an analysis of the culture-related sign-vehicles of *Black Mamba Two* we have been able to establish the centrality of race issues and cultural conflicts in the play. An understanding of the sign-vehicles helps us to have a better understanding of the play. In the next chapter, we shall examine the key culture-related sign-vehicles of Kani's *Nothing but the Truth*.

## CHAPTER FIVE: ANALYSIS OF *NOTHING BUT THE TRUTH*

### 1.0 General Introduction

In the last chapter we started the analysis of texts with Kasoma's *Black Mamba Two*. In this chapter our focus shifts to the analysis of *Nothing but the Truth*, a play by South African playwright John Kani. We shall attempt to determine the extent to which the two plays are similar or different in terms of how their semiotic qualities relate to the cultural factor.

### 2.0 Introduction

*Nothing but the Truth* is John Kani's first work as a solo playwright, his earlier works having been collaborative in nature. Famous examples include works co-authored with Athol Fugard and Winston Tshona, such as *Sizwe Bansi is Dead* (1972) and *The Island* (1973). While Kani's earlier works were concerned with the apartheid era of South African social and political reality, *Nothing but the Truth* falls in the category of post-apartheid works that are referred to as 'Theatre for Reconciliation'.

However, it exposes the shortcomings of reconciliation as espoused by [South Africa's] political leaders, who focused on reconciliation between blacks and whites, and forgot that there is a dire need for reconciliation among the blacks themselves. The play also illustrates quite vividly why it is still necessary to talk about the past: because the past will always be a powerful presence in the present (Kani 2002: viii).

*Nothing but the Truth* covers events associated with the period just after the end of white rule in 1994. Through the lives and interactions of two brothers, Sipho and Themba, and their daughters, Thando and Mandisa respectively, *Nothing but the Truth* explores the historical and political issues associated with the question of post-apartheid reconciliation.

### **3.0 *Nothing but the Truth* as Contemporary African Drama**

Like *Black Mamba Two*, John Kani's *Nothing but the Truth* has all the characteristics of a contemporary piece of African drama. Set in the South African township of New Brighton in Port Elizabeth on the Indian Ocean coast, *Nothing but the Truth* tells a story that is uniquely South African, in the same way that Kasoma's *Black Mamba Two* is uniquely Zambian. In addition, *Nothing but the Truth*, like *Black Mamba Two*, is inspired by historical realities. However, while *Black Mamba Two* is more history than fiction and therefore qualifies to be called a historical play, *Nothing but the Truth* is an attempt by the author to place fiction into a historical context.

#### **3.1 Subject and Themes**

In dealing with the reconciliation process that dominated South African society after the end of apartheid, *Nothing but the Truth* draws our attention to the problem of the serious contradictions that followed liberation. At the core of the problem is the question of who the real heroes of the South African anti-apartheid struggle are – those who fought from exile, or those who fought from within. Related to this is the question of who deserves to reap the fruit of the struggle. Is it those who, like Siphon Makhaya, the play's main character, endured the brutality of apartheid within the country, or those who, like Siphon's brother Themba, left home to endure the challenges of life in a foreign land? Who sacrificed more, those who stayed, or those who left?

#### **3.2 Structure and Plot**

The structure and plot of the play follow the Aristotelian model. The action rises to a climax and descends to the resolution. There is no attempt on the part of the playwright to experiment with the structure or plot.

#### **3.3 Characterisation**

As residents of New Brighton, Siphon and his daughter Thando are as African as any real life resident of the township, which was originally built in 1903 as a dwelling-place of Africans outside the town of Port Elizabeth. At 63, Siphon is an African traditionalist who cannot bring himself to accept the cremation of Themba's body. Thando exhibits a degree

of ambivalence in her character – a characteristic which is, however, more pronounced in Mandisa, Themba’s daughter, who comes to South Africa after growing up in London. In general, the characters of the play provide a window through which we can look at life in New Brighton during and after the apartheid era.

### **3.4 Language**

The play, like the typical Anglophone contemporary African play, is written in English, but, characteristically, it occasionally resorts to indigenous South African expressions. However, the level of use of local languages is much lower in *Nothing but the Truth* than in *Black Mamba Two*, partly because Kani is more inclined to conventional theatre, while Kasoma is, as Etherton observes (1976: 34), ‘a popular dramatist’.

### **4.0 Reading the Signs**

*Nothing but the Truth* may not have as many culturally significant signs as *Black Mamba Two*, but it makes for interesting reading when its sign-vehicles are analysed from the cultural perspective.

#### **4.1 Properties**

##### **(a) Urn**

The urn is the central signifier in *Nothing but the Truth*. It is introduced at the beginning of Scene Two, when Sipho Makhaya enters carrying the urn. He puts it down on the coffee table of the living room and ‘sits down on his chair, eyes fixed on the urn’ (13). The introduction of the urn is dramatic and adds an element of suspense as we wonder why Sipho has brought it, what it contains, and why he fixes his gaze on it. Most importantly, we wonder about its semiotic significance. We however begin to get a hint of the contents of the urn when Sipho says to Mandisa: ‘You burnt my brother.’ We get an even better hint from Mandisa when she responds: ‘Don’t say burnt. He was cremated, and that was my mother’s wish.’ The picture becomes clearer when Sipho, pointing at the urn, asks Mandisa, ‘What is in this thing?’ She then answers: ‘His ashes.’

What is worth noting about the introduction of the urn as a sign-vehicle is that the hints and clues make it possible for us to keep revising our suspicions as to what the urn contains and signifies. The revising continues until we arrive at the right understanding of what, at the surface level, the urn signifies. It contains ashes, remains of Themba's cremated body. The ashes are proof of his death.

It would be possible to argue, however, that at the semiotic level the urn signifies a variety of contexts and meanings which make it the central signifier of the play. Semiotically, the play evolves around the urn and its contents, which have social, political and cultural ramifications. The urn is also the scaffolding from which the play's main conflicts are constructed. The urn – and by extension the ashes – represents not only death, but also the significance of the concepts of family, home, *Ubuntu*, and respect for ancestors.

(i) *Family*

The importance of family is a motif that runs through the play. From the African perspective, family, which includes the departed ancestors, is sacred and must be revered, protected, and supported. It must not be allowed to die. Siphso views himself as the custodian of family and family values, which are steeped in African cultural values. Family values must neither be ignored nor violated, and this view is key to understanding some of the conflicts of the play.

Thus, despite having being offended in the past by Themba, Siphso feels obligated to accord his younger brother a decent burial, complete with the funeral rites expected of a deceased family member. Family ties remain unbroken even in death, and it is for this reason that Siphso is offended by Themba's wife's decision to cremate his body without first obtaining permission from the 'family' – that is, the extended family in South Africa. The cremation was, as it turns out, the wish of Themba's wife, not Themba's, whose wish was to be buried next to his parents' grave in South Africa. That way Themba would be 're-united' with family.

Thus, by settling for cremation, Themba's wife violates a family value. In this context, Themba's 'family' is not just him, the wife and daughter Mandisa, but, more importantly, Themba, his daughter, and the 'family' in South Africa. Themba's wife is therefore a 'stranger' who only happened to get married to him. What right does she, a black person from Barbados, have to dispose of the body of a 'family member' by way of cremation?

Themba's understanding of 'family' is not different from Siphos. Mandisa recalls how, when she would visit her mother's family in Barbados, Themba would say to her (Scene Two, 16): 'These are your mother's people. Your family is in South Africa.' This concept of family differs significantly from that of Themba's wife, who obviously perceives of herself as part of the deceased's 'real family' by virtue of having been his wife and being the mother to his 22-year-old daughter, Mandisa. Hence she does not see any need to consult Siphos on the issue of how to dispose of Themba's body. To her and Mandisa, financial considerations are paramount, not cultural demands. Cremation would help reduce the cost of transporting Themba's remains to South Africa as compared to insisting on burying the body.

Siphos initially thinks Mandisa is bringing Themba's body because the letter from her mother says, 'Mandisa will be coming with him.' Mandisa insists that by bringing the ashes, she had brought back her father. However, he completely rejects the notion that his brother has been brought back because, according to him, his family does not cremate its dead:

This letter said Mandisa would be coming with my brother. That is why I arranged a funeral. I could have organised a memorial in the St Stephen's Church Hall. He wanted to be buried next to my Mom and Dad, said the letter. No one said he wants his ashes to be scattered beside his Mom and Dad's grave. You have embarrassed me. Hurt me. She should have asked me whether the family objected to my brother being cremated. *No one asked me. I am his brother. I am his family* (14, emphasis mine).

In line with family expectations and values, Siphos, being older than Themba, is responsible for his brother's welfare, both in life and in death. When Themba went to

university to study for a B.Comm degree, Siphso took up the responsibility of meeting most of his financial and material needs. Their father only paid for the boarding and tuition. Even when Themba failed to get a job after graduating, Siphso continued to support him (33). Asked by Thando why he continued to support Themba, Siphso says: 'Because he was my brother. He was family' (34). Similarly, when Mandisa asks Siphso if he had loved her father, he evasively says, 'He was my brother. He was family' (35).

Family does not just mean siblings taking care of the needs of each other, or a father those of his children, but also the children taking care of their parents' needs. Thus, for Thando, it is important to take care of Siphso by cooking for him (38) and generally being there for him. It also means being obedient to him, as Mandisa discovers when she tries to take Thando with her to Johannesburg and London. Mandisa cannot understand why Thando needs to first get permission from Siphso when she is an adult who should make her own decisions (41).

Having grown up in London, Mandisa has a different understanding of family. As far as she is concerned, Siphso is being overly conservative and his attempts to control Thando and keep her under strict surveillance is outdated and an infringement of her rights. These opposed views of family lead to conflict between Siphso and Mandisa, who in fact almost succeeds in converting Thando to her viewpoint.

When Thando, out of respect for her father, is reluctant to push him into permitting her to go to Johannesburg and London, Mandisa decides to take up the issue (Act Two, Scene One, 42-3):

*MANDISA: Ask him now Thando.*

*THANDO: Stay out of this Mandisa.*

*MANDISA: Ask him now.*

*THANDO: Shut up Mandisa!*

*MANDISA: Then I will ask him for you. Uncle Siphso would you please be so kind as to allow Thando to go with me to Johannesburg next week since she is still on holiday from school?*

*SIPHO: No.*

*MANDISA: What do you mean No. Should you at least not ask her what she thinks?*

*SIPHO: No.*

*MANDISA: No, you don't care what she thinks, or No, she can't go.*

*SIPHO: No! No!*

*THANDO: Daddy. I think Mandisa is right. You should ask me if I want to go. You can't just say No without hearing me first. After all she is my sister, isn't she? Your brother's daughter. She is family, isn't she?*

*SIPHO: My answer is No. And it is final!*

*MANDISA: What do you say Thando?*

*THANDO: I will talk to my father about this later.*

*MANDISA: No. Now. You can't allow him to run your life like this. Are you coming with me to Johannesburg and London next week?*

*THANDO: Stop it Mandisa!*

*MANDISA: No. I want to know now. You have to tell me now. Are you coming?*

*THANDO: Stop it Mandisa!*

What Mandisa considers to be unreasonable conservatism is normal family practice for Siphso and Thando. A daughter must not disobey or disrespect her parents, particularly her father. Thando is also aware that, in the context of the African family, particularly the patrilineal ones, a daughter is not as important to the father as a son. She says to Mandisa, 'African men love their sons more than their daughters' (Act One, Scene Two, 20).

Yet, with the death of her step-brother Luvuyo and her parents' divorce, Thando is now key to Siphso's perception of family. She is the only person that justifies his role as father. He is afraid of losing her if she goes with Mandisa. Family, therefore, must keep together, in life and in death, hence Themba's wish to be buried next to his parents. Ironically, however, Themba violated the sanctity of family by sleeping with Siphso's wife. This is the reason for his failure to return to South Africa when Mandela comes to power in 1994, as well as part of the reason for Siphso's bitterness toward him.

Themba does not just violate the sanctity of family, but also the sanctity of his brother's marriage. What is painful for Siphso is that the adulterous affair had gone on for three years, leaving open the possibility that Thando could, in fact, be Themba's daughter and, therefore, Mandisa's biological sister (51). In addition, Themba abuses the hospitality accorded him by Siphso. Despite being helped so profoundly by Siphso, Themba demonstrates gross ungratefulness by defiling his brother's conjugal bed. He breaks a taboo.

Despite his brother's transgressions, Siphso feels obligated to give him an honourable burial as expected of tradition. Themba was family, despite his past heinous transgressions. However, Siphso argues that he had forgiven his brother 'long ago' (56) and all he wanted was for him to come home, face him and apologise (56). According to him, there would be no reason to forgive an offending brother who is family: 'If I can forgive all the white people for what they did to us in this country, how can I not forgive my own brother' (56).

As things stand, however, Themba is dead, and only his ashes have returned home. He cannot apologise. Yet family still has to be preserved, and family must continue, must outlive all conflicts and differences. Hence Siphso reconciles with Mandisa and Thando, and brings himself to accepting the realities of his situation – that Themba is dead but that he, on the other hand, still has a life to live, and still has family to take care of. The urn, however, does not just signify Themba's death, but also his disconnection from family. Just as his ashes are enclosed within the urn, Themba is enclosed in a past of broken taboos, transgressions and isolation from family.

The urn also signifies Themba's failure to reconcile with Siphso, who is now faced with the reality of confronting ashes instead of his brother's body. At least a dead body has a face he would have looked at, a semblance of life he would have spoken to. However, the ashes are faceless. How do his people carry out a night vigil with only ashes to put to dispose of? Although a couple of times Siphso tries to address himself to the ashes, he knows the ashes represent a finality which he cannot reverse.

Denied the opportunity to reconcile with his Themba, Siphos realises, even as he vainly addresses the ashes, that the only alternative is to reconcile himself to the finality of the end of Themba as signified by the ashes in the urn. The past, the ashes, must be disposed of, and the future embraced. He realises that family transcends conflicts and differences of opinion, and he should be his brother's keeper in death as he was in life. He picks up the urn and says, 'Themba, my brother, I love you. About my wife... it happened' (59).

(ii) *Home*

Related to the concept of family is the concept of what constitutes 'home'. In the context of the play home, like family, is in South Africa. From the African cultural perspective, home is not where one's house is located, but rather where one's roots are. Despite being an exile, Themba agreed with his estranged brother on this. He made it a point to make Mandisa realise that Camden Town, the London suburb where she was born, was not her home. She reveals in her conversation with Thando (18): 'Father wanted me to study medicine – 'There is a shortage of doctors at home'. He always reminded us of the needs of "home", South Africa...'

When Mandisa agrees to stay with her 'family' (Siphos and Thando) during the mourning period for her late father, Thando is quick to make her feel she is 'home'. For Siphos and Thando, Mandisa's home is not just South Africa, but, more specifically, the family house where Siphos now lives (Act One, Scene Two, 16).

*THANDO: Welcome home.*

*MANDISA: Home. That's all we talked about with my father. He's always said to me 'England is not your home, it's just where you live. It's where your house is. My home is in South Africa, 46 Madala Street, New Brighton, Port Elizabeth. That's where your home is, African Princess.'*

*THANDO: African Princess? That's what my father used to call me too when I was young.*

*MANDISA: It always made me feel so African.*

Later Mandisa says, 'I am happy to be home' (16), a sign that she fully accepts her father's definition of 'home'. In acknowledging that she is back home, Mandisa also acknowledges that she is family, although she is yet to fully get acquainted with, and to fully accept, the values of her family.

Mandisa finds it hard to reconcile her western-type individuality and the communality of her African family. Ironically, however, it is to the same communality and collective spirit of the African family that her late father owed whatever success he managed to attain. Without family, Themba would not have managed to attain a university education. In an individualistic society, Siphso would have left him to fend for himself.

Thando and Siphso help Mandisa to feel 'at home' by letting her know she is family and their home is her home. It is not just the concept of home that Mandisa has to get used to, but also that of family. Thando, for one, tells Mandisa that they are not cousins, but 'sisters' (Act One, Scene Two, 17).

*MANDISA: It's great to be here with you at last, my cousin Thando.*

*THANDO: Uh-Uh. My sister, Mandisa. Your father and my father were brothers. In my family that makes us sisters.*

*MANDISA: What's a cousin then?*

*THANDO: If you were my father's sister's child, then you would be my cousin, as we would not share the same clan and surname.*

*THANDO: So you are my sister?*

*MANDISA: Yes I am, yes I am...*

Now that Mandisa is back home, if only for a short while, she has an opportunity to see for herself what her father had told her about home. She does acknowledge, in fact, that even as she grew up in distant London her father made sure she was not ignorant about South Africa: 'I grew up listening to all the stories about HOME' (21). What is significant in this statement is that the playwright capitalises the word 'home', to emphasise the high premium placed on the concept of home.

Despite his fear of returning to South Africa, Themba loved home and when his health began to fail him, according to Mandisa, he ‘began to long for home’ (21). She adds that six months before his death, Themba called his family together: ‘He asked us a favour – to ask his brother to bury him *at home* next to his parents. *Closer to his ancestors*’ (21, emphasis mine). If Themba could not be with his ancestors in life due to unfortunate circumstances, then at least he would be with them in death, if only symbolically. Home is not exile, but where the ancestors are buried. What is ironic about Themba’s situation is that his life belies his beliefs about home. He lives thousands of miles away from his ancestral home, and has married a West Indian woman. Yet, when advising Mandisa about marriage, he emphasises that she ‘must marry a South African black man’ (22).

The concept of home in this cultural context not only implies a blood connection to one’s family and ancestors, but also to the soil. Thus, Themba’s wish to be buried next to his ancestors is borne of his homesickness and life-long desire to reconnect with the soil. This is what adds to the significance of the burial, both from Themba’s and also Siphos perspectives. Siphos had looked forward to burying a body, not scattering ashes on the burial ground. Ultimately, therefore, the urn and ashes continue to signify Themba’s continued detachment from family and ‘home’. His ashes cannot be buried, but merely scattered next to the graves of his parents. The elements would then take care of them, in the same way that they were to take care of the body of Polynices. The wind would blow away Themba’s era.

### (iii) *Taboos*

The preservation of family and home depends, to some extent, on adherence to some taboos. To disregard the family or home is taboo. Themba, however, breaks a number of taboos, as shown earlier. However, another terrible taboo committed by Themba is disrespecting the funeral of his own father. Themba, now in exile and therefore unable to attend the funeral, uses his connection to the United Democratic Front (UDF) to politicise the funeral. Siphos was hurt by what transpired, and blames Themba (46):

They turned my father’s funeral into a political rally. There were twelve speakers. One after the other, talking about Themba’s father. I sat there like a stranger. I

paid for the coffin. I paid for all the funeral arrangements. I even paid for the food they were all eating. But I was just Comrade Themba's brother. They whisked his coffin away, carried it shoulder high and ran with it all the way to the cemetery. My aunts and uncles could not keep up with them. The police were all over. It was chaos. Kids were toyi-toying, taunting the police to shoot them. It was like the day they buried my son. I ran behind the coffin. At the graveyard I was not even the first to throw the soil on the coffin. No, it was the delegates first. The songs went on forever. The police could not take it anymore. They fired teargas right at the graveyard. People began to run. Old ladies coughing and crying. I stood there, right over my father's coffin. I did not run. I wanted the police to shoot me right there. I had had enough of it all. When the dust settled, the police gone, the comrades gone, it was just Rev Hay and the undertaker and me still standing there. The teargas did not affect us at all it seemed. Rev Haya said a prayer and I buried my father. I alone filled the grave with the soil, planted the cross with his name, date of birth and date of death. Lala ngoxolo mfo wase Ma Cireni. I then said a little prayer and said goodbye to my father. I apologised for the chaos. I was very angry at Themba for doing that to my father.

Once again Themba fails to honour family. He stays in the safety of London, afraid to come back home for his father's funeral, while Siphso has to keep the family together. Family must never be abandoned, and, from the proxemic point of view, Siphso's brave decision to stay at his father's graveside despite the danger from the police signifies his dedication to family. He is ready to sacrifice his life for family. His commitment to family is reminiscent of what happens in the Sophoclean play, *Antigone*. Despite King Creon's decree that Polynices should not be accorded a proper burial with burial rites, Antigone decides to disobey. She would rather die than see her brother's body remain exposed to the carrion birds and the elements. On the other hand, the fact that Themba is so far away from his father's coffin at this particular point in time proxemically signifies his detachment from family.

In a near repeat of history, Themba's daughter, Mandisa, almost 'distances' herself from her father's funeral by wanting to stay away from the funeral house. Thinking it is enough that she has brought her father's remains from London, Mandisa initially books herself a room at the Garden Court Plaza. She is told she has to stay at the funeral house until after the burial (12). Thus she cancels her booking and stays with 'family' in New Brighton, a ghetto in Port Elizabeth, a city originally founded in 1820 on the east coast by British settlers (Fugard 2000: xvii).

It appears ironic that, from the perspective of family, Themba failed his father at the funeral, and now, many years later, his own daughter is also about to fail him at his funeral. Mandisa, like her father, does not break the funeral taboo only because of Thando's strong advice. As far as she is concerned, she already mourned her father in London and must now be allowed to move on with life. She is already thinking of making an appointment to meet a fashion designer in Johannesburg. What she does not appreciate is that, for family, the funeral has just started (19):

*THANDO: You are not staying a little longer... I mean to mourn?*

*MANDISA: My father died two weeks ago. I've done all the mourning... I've got work to do now.*

*THANDO: My father would expect us to show some respect for at least a month as children. Elderly people mourn much longer. He won't allow me to go with you to Jo'burg.*

Later, when Mandisa picks up the phone to call Thando's boyfriend so that they can go for 'a quick bite at a restaurant' (38), Thando again tries to make her understand the importance of respecting family by staying at the funeral house (39):

*MANDISA:... I don't think anyone would mind if we went out tonight.*

*THANDO: And when my father comes back and we are not here? What if some people come to enquire about the funeral? No, we can't go anywhere.*

*MANDISA: What is all the fuss about. The whole funeral business is just ceremonial.*

*THANDO: Not for us. We have a funeral tomorrow. Put that phone down.*

*MANDISA [putting down the phone]: Well I am going out tonight. I've spent the whole day listening to sad stories.*

*THANDO: Your father's funeral is tomorrow Mandisa. Show some respect and mourn for him.*

*MANDISA: No one tells me what to do with my life. I am going out.*

*THANDO: You are in my father's house. We are mourning the death of my uncle. Show some respect for our traditions. This is not England.*

*MANDISA: My father did say that his brother was a bit conservative. Thando, you are young. You don't have to do what pleases him.*

*THANDO: This has nothing to do with my father. It's what I want to do. That's what this community expects of us and you are going to do the same.*

*MANDISA: OK. I will stay. What are we going to eat? Can I help?*

*THANDO: That sounds better. I'll whip up something quickly.*

Apart from showing disregard for funeral taboos, Mandisa breaks the taboo of respecting elders. While Thando is afraid of Siphso because of the prominence cultural practice gives him due to age and the mere fact of being her father, Mandisa shows disregard for him. She thinks he is too conservative and backward and a danger to his daughter's individual rights.

Ironically, the ashes, which are a reminder of a life of disrespect for taboo, now also signify taboo. In other words, by cremating Themba, his wife commits a taboo. In the end, however, it remains for Siphso to deal with the funeral, in the same way that he had done years back when his father had died.

(b) *Photos*

Photographs are a classic example of signifiers especially because they represent an actual person or thing. Perhaps out of guilt for being the one to bring back ashes instead of her father's body, Mandisa gives Siphso a recent photograph of Themba (58). On the

other hand, she might be attempting to compensate for the absence of the body by giving Siphso an opportunity to at least look at the face of his brother.

The photo, however, also signifies, like the ashes, the finality of Themba's expiration. Siphso cannot be satisfied with burying the photo any more than he can be by burying the ashes. Neither can Siphso reconcile with a photo. In addition, the photo cannot apologise for violating the sanctity of family and marriage. The photo cannot mend what the person it represents destroyed. In response, Siphso gives Mandisa a photo of him and Themba taken in 1954, when they were young boys. At a deeper semiotic level, the photo signifies the irretrievable past of innocence, brotherly love and care. In this regard the photo is no different from the ashes. The photo and the joy and brotherhood it represents are frozen in time. The reality of the present is very different from the 'reality' of the photograph.

Taken together, the two photos signify both the past and the present; they represent what was, what is, and what should have been. They represent Themba's isolation: in the earlier photo, he is with his brother (family), but in the 'current' photo, he is alone. It is a photo taken in exile, not at 'home', and it therefore does not represent the warmth of 'home', but the coldness of exile.

## **4.2 Ubuntu**

*Nothing but the Truth* is, in part, preoccupied with the serious questions and issues surrounding the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) established by the new democratic government of Nelson Mandela. After attending the TRC Amnesty hearings, Mandisa fails to grasp the logic behind forgiving the perpetrators of apartheid crimes simply on the grounds that they make full disclosure of their wrongdoings. According to her, 'somebody must be made to pay' (29).

Thando defends the decision to give amnesty to agents of apartheid, arguing that it was the right thing to do anything else would have led to civil war. Mandisa condemns what her father had called 'The generosity of the African people' (30). Despite being skeptical of the granting of amnesty because his son Luvuyo was killed by the agents of the

apartheid regime, Siphos explains the cultural context of the amnesty: 'It is called African humanity, *ubuntu*, not generosity' (30).

*Ubuntu* was touted as African culture's response to, and an antithesis of, apartheid, which was essentially a product of Afrikaner culture. By creating and institutionalising apartheid, the South African white-led National Party wanted to preserve Afrikaner (or European) culture. Thus, while apartheid separated, *Ubuntu* sought to reconcile and unify; where apartheid destroyed, *Ubuntu* sought to rebuild.

There is a sense, however, in which the ashes in the urn symbolise the contradictions and shortcomings of *Ubuntu* as the new narrative of post-apartheid South Africa. The man whose remains occupy the urn, Themba, was, like many other South Africans, separated from family and home largely because of the inhuman policies of apartheid. The fact that the remains come back home enclosed in an urn represent the isolation of exiles from family, home, and their culture. However, apartheid separated even the people who chose to stay in South Africa as opposed to going into exile. Some of the exiles, like Ruth First, were assassinated in exile by the agents of apartheid (28). They never had the chance to have even their ashes returned to South Africa. Yet the ashes in the urn, at another level, signify the burnt hopes and aspirations of many South Africans who were forced into exile by apartheid.

At the heart of *Ubuntu* is the idea that Africans respect humanity and are hospitable and forgiving. The play, therefore, through the urn, questions whether the *Ubuntu* paradigm is an adequate replacement for the apartheid paradigm. Can *Ubuntu* redefine the narrative of race relations in South Africa the way apartheid did when it was institutionalised in 1948?

### **4.3 Setting (The Family House)**

To the Makhaya family, 46 Madala Street, the family house in New Brighton, is more than home. It is also a monument to family history and custom. It is ultimately a microcosm of the culture of black South Africans, especially as it was during the

apartheid era. At the height of grand apartheid, black people were forced to live in ghettos such as New Brighton. This, however, led to a lifestyle that defined South African black culture.

For example, after being frustrated by his failure to land the coveted job of Chief Librarian, Sipho goes drinking at Sky's shebeen within New Brighton (30). The shebeens developed as a result of Afrikaner segregation. At some point in the development of the apartheid state, 'white' liquor was not available to Africans, hence some whites illegally sold huge amounts of the alcohol to black bootleggers who in turn resold it to 'shebeen queens' who ran shebeens in the black townships (Fugard 2000: xviii). It is worth noting, therefore, that, when Mandisa says the Makhaya house has the 'township smell', she means 'the dust, coal stoves...smell of the people – houses, dogs, rubbish, unkempt gardens, shebeens, skokiaan joints, all put together making the smell of life' (18-19). The 'township smell' is the 'smell' of African culture, and it permeates the Makhaya house. The family house, which Sipho inherited from his father, signifies the importance of family and family values. It is a house whose occupants live in a world of taboos and rules enforced by Sipho. Thando makes it a point that Mandisa understands this fact: 'Things are different here. This is not London. There are rules in this house' (19).

Themba's departure from this house epitomises his alienation from all that it stands for. This alienation is vicariously demonstrated through his daughter's failure to adjust to life in the old Makhaya household. This in part is because of the contrast between the Makhaya house in South Africa and Themba's house in London. While the former pulsates with the energy of African culture, the latter is identified more with the anti-apartheid struggle of South African exiles. Mandisa underlines this fact when she says to Thando (21): 'Our house was like a halfway house for all South Africans. I grew up listening to all the stories about HOME. The struggle, the memories and the songs. Bra Hugh and Sis Mirriam [musicians Hugh Masekela and Mirriam Makeba] once came to our house. What a gig. They were performing in some venue and so my dad had a few friends around.'

Themba, who is forced to flee South Africa by circumstances, had longed to reconnect with 46 Madala Street and what it represents. However, when he does return to the source of his cultural and spiritual strength, he is nothing but ash. He therefore does not really reconnect with his roots, except vicariously through his daughter Mandisa who, on the other hand, is more interested in her career as a fashion designer than in discovering the depth of her African identity. Ironically, Mandisa is herself an example of Themba's failed attempt to reconnect with his roots and family because he names her after his paternal aunt, 'Dadobawo' Mandisa (17).

#### **4.4 Characters**

##### *(a) Siph*

Siph would like to think of himself as a symbol of the non-exiles who contributed to the struggle against apartheid but are ignored or undervalued by the former exiles. As far as he is concerned, he sacrificed as much for South Africa's liberation as those who chose to fight from exile (52-3):

I was part of the Struggle. I too suffered as a black person. I went to the marches like everyone else. I might not have been detained. I might not have been on Robben Island. I did not leave this country, but I suffered too. The thousands that attended those funerals on Saturdays, that was me. The thousands that were tear gassed, sjamboked by the police, mauled by Alsatian dogs, that was me. When Bishop Tutu led thousands through the streets of white Port Elizabeth, that was me. I WAS THOSE THOUSANDS! I too deserved some recognition, didn't I?

However, Siph also signifies the survival of South African indigenous culture in the midst of the difficulties created by apartheid, which in effect was a tool for the preservation of Afrikaner culture and society. Siph takes over his late father's role as custodian of the family home and values, and does not allow even Themba's transgressions to deviate him from his commitment to family. He is therefore more a symbol of cultural resistance to apartheid. Themba, on the other hand, is a symbol of militant political resistance.

One of the tenets of apartheid as a cultural tool was to deny the humanity of Africans and therefore justify the rape of their land and culture. Siphon relates an anecdote which reflects the callous nature of the apartheid cultural perspective. While working as a clerk for a white-owned law firm called Spilkin & Spilkin Attorneys, Mr Spilkin wrongly pronounced his name as 'Sifo'. Siphon, whose name means 'gift', tries to correct Spilkin, explaining that his name is not 'Sifo', which means 'disease'. Sarcastically Spilkin asks, 'What's the difference?' and continues to call him Sifo.

The apartheid culture had no regard for Africans and their culture, hence Spilkin's insistence on calling Siphon by a corrupted version of his name. Indeed, 'what difference does it make' because, from the perspective of the racist Afrikaner, Siphon is no different from a 'disease' – a cultural and social disease which must be expunged from civilised society, or, at the very least, kept at bay through the segregation laws of apartheid. If Siphon is a disease, a curse, so are his people and culture. The fact that Siphon outlives apartheid, however, makes him a testament to the depth of African culture. The fact that he has not been uprooted from 46 Madala Street bears testimony to the fact that he has not been alienated from his roots and history.

(b) *Mandisa*

It is our view that Mandisa, like her father, epitomises cultural alienation. Thus she finds it hard to have a harmonious relationship with her uncle Siphon, who she thinks is too conservative – a view bequeathed on her by her late father. Mandisa is culturally at variance with Siphon, and this is the root of much of the conflict in *Nothing but the Truth*. In our opinion Mandisa is a schizophrenic character who tries to be (a black) South African among the British and tries to be British among South Africans. What worsens her situation is that her mother is neither South African nor British but a West Indian from Barbados. Her cultural alienation and ambivalence of personality is reflected in her names, Mandisa McKay.

Mandisa explains to a puzzled Thando that her parents decided to register her, at birth, as McKay in order to enable her 'fit in', meaning the name Makhaya, which signifies her

cultural roots, would make it difficult for her to be accepted in the British society (16). Mandisa cannot even speak her father's language properly, and her attempt to do so only demonstrates the extent of her cultural alienation (16). Mandisa is an extension of her late father's personality and vicariously continues his cultural alienation. On the other hand she also wants to be accepted into Siphos world of taboos and family values. However, she is a slow learner, and it takes her almost till the end of the play to realise that, in Siphos world of taboos, truth itself can be taboo, especially if it is unpleasant. Hence she fails to understand why Thando cannot confront her father with the frank truth about the need to give her some space to be herself and to realise her own dreams.

Mandisa also fails to understand why Siphos does not want to talk about the truth or why he keeps evading questions about her father's past. She wants 'nothing but the truth', but the truth is taboo. Siphos keeps the truth even from Thando because, apparently, it is taboo for him to discuss the sordid facts of his past with his own daughter. It is only when Mandisa and Thando push him to tell the 'truth' about his relationship with Themba, coupled with the influence of alcoholic drink, that Siphos finally opens up. It is hard for the young ladies to take the truth, and Mandisa weeps when she learns of her father's past transgressions, particularly the adultery that caused the bad blood between the two brothers. Siphos, not caring any more, rants on: 'The truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth, so help me God. That's what you asked for. So sit down and take it like the adults you both claim to be' (49).

Painful as it is, however, the total disclosure helps to heal the wounds of the past, although Themba is not there to apologise, and Mandisa's sorrow cannot atone for her father's iniquities. Thando is equally shocked by the revelations, and can only say to her father: 'All these years we have lived together you've kept this in your heart, alone. You've never shared with me, your own daughter. Why?' Siphos characteristically answers, 'How could I tell you. It was best to say nothing' (50).

## **5.0 Conclusion**

In this chapter we have established that there is a strong connection between the major sign-vehicles of the play and cultural concepts of family, home, human relations, taboos and values. Cultural variance plays a pivotal role in the development of conflict and conflict resolution in the play. The past is intertwined with the present and the future. We have also established that, as in the preceding chapter, some sign-vehicles can only be interpreted and used in their cultural context. In the next chapter we shall continue with the semiotic analysis of texts as we shift our attention to Christina Ama Ata Aidoo's *The Dilemma of a Ghost*.

## CHAPTER SIX: Analysis of *The Dilemma of a Ghost*

### 1.0 General Introduction

Chapter Five focused on the analysis of *Nothing but the Truth*, a play by South African John Kani, while Chapter Four was an analysis of *The Black Mamba Two* by Zambia's Kabwe Kasoma. This chapter, on the other hand, shifts the focus to West Africa as it analyses *The Dilemma of a Ghost*, a play by Ghana's Christina Ama Ata Aidoo. The chapter will therefore accord us an opportunity to see whether or not the culture-related sign-vehicles of Aidoo's play are similar to or different from those of *The Black Mamba Two* and *Nothing but the Truth*.

### 2.0 Introduction

*The Dilemma of a Ghost* is Aidoo's first-ever publication. Although it was published in 1965, she wrote it in 1964, and it premiered in the same year. It was first performed by students of the University of Ghana, Legon, in March 1964 (Aidoo 1970: iv). Unlike *The Black Mamba Two* and *Nothing but the Truth*, Aidoo's play has no relationship to actual historical events. Although the themes and characters bear resemblance to historical realities, the play is totally fictitious. Thus, for example, whereas *The Black Mamba Two* and *Nothing but the Truth* bear historical facts such as Kaunda's and Mandela's leadership, respectively, *The Dilemma of a Ghost* deals only with fictitious characters and events.

In addition, unlike the other two plays, *The Dilemma of a Ghost* does not deal with political themes. However, like the two plays, Aidoo's play is characterised by serious cultural conflict. The conflict arises from intercultural matrimony between a Ghanaian national, Ato Yawson, and Eulalie, an African-American whom he marries during his study stint in America. What compounds the problem is that Yawson does not consult his family before marrying Eulalie, as well as her ignorance and immaturity.

### **3.0 *The Dilemma of a Ghost* as Contemporary African Drama**

Like *The Black Mamba Two* and *Nothing but the Truth*, Aidoo's *Dilemma of a Ghost* is in every sense a piece of contemporary African drama. Aidoo successfully blends African and western conventions to create an interesting story of contrasts of cultures and perspectives. The setting of the play is peculiarly African and provides an appropriate backdrop for the action and interaction of characters. The interactants relate to each other in an ambience of rural Africa where African traditions and customs have deep roots. The arrival of a multicultural couple in this environment provides a recipe for serious cultural conflict.

#### **3.1 Subject and Themes**

The play is concerned with the problem of conflict between traditional African culture and western education and values in the context of an intercultural marriage. The play also deals with the importance of the role of women in the process of change. In the play it takes the determination and reasoning of Yawson's mother, Esi Kom, to bring reconciliation in a situation of fractured relationships. Thus, Esi Kom is the agent of healing for the family which, as is the case in *Nothing but the Truth*, is central to the concept of communality in the village. Family must not be ignored in significant events such as marriage, and mistreating 'guests' (such as Eulalie) is contrary to the cultural ethos.

The play also highlights the uneasy relationship between Africans on the continent and those descended from slaves taken to the United States and other parts of the world. Should African-Americans, for example, consider themselves 'African', and should Africans 'accept' them as fellow Africans?

#### **3.2 Structure and Plot**

One peculiar feature of the structure of the play is the inclusion of the 'prelude' before the main action of the play. The prelude is narrated by the Bird of the Wayside, which is associated more with traditional African narrative technique. The play, therefore, blends western and traditional African approaches to narration. However, its plot, as is

characteristic of western dramatic convention, has a climax and descends to a resolution of the conflict when Esi Kom facilitates family reconciliation.

### 3.3 Characterisation

The African characters of *Dilemma of a Ghost* are believable and convincing. They are the types of characters who would be found in any African village environment. Esi Kom, Nana and Monka, for example, are all women that could be found in any African village setting. The behaviour and cultural perspective of the villagers, both male and female, is typical of people living in African village set-ups. They generally are dogmatic about their customs but suspicious of foreign ones.

Ato Yawson may be different from them, but only because his years of studying in America have exposed him to western values which, to a large extent, constitute a cultural antithesis to traditional Ghanaian society. On the other hand, we can only understand Eulalie by contrasting her character and perspective with that of ‘genuine’ African characters. Esi Kom, for example, is a foil to Eulalie.

### 3.4 Language

The language used in *The Dilemma of a Ghost* contains a number of registers.

#### (a) *The English language as used by Eulalie*

Aidoo succeeds in distinguishing the English language spoken by Eulalie from that of Ato. The register is American – more specifically a form more likely to be spoken by an African-American. For example, Eulalie’s use of the terms ‘folks’, ‘Ma’ (for mother), ‘Pa’ (for father) is peculiarly American (3). Ato describes Eulalie’s speech idiosyncrasy as a ‘running-tap drawl’ (3), to which she responds: ‘Well, what did you mean by running-tap drawl? I only speak like I was born to speak – like an American!’

#### (b) *The English language as used by Ato.*

Ato would like to demonstrate the fact that he is a ‘been-to’ – an educated one for that – by the way he speaks English. For example, after dreaming about two little boys, Ato, who at first takes the dream to be real, rushes onto the stage and says (24):

Where are they? Where are those two urchins? Heavens! Those scruffy urchins and the racket of noise they were making. Why should they come here? But... Where are they? Or was it a dream? Ugh! That's why I hate siesta. Afternoon sleep always brings me afternoon dreams, horrid, disgusting, enigmatic dreams. Damn this ghost at the junction.

(c) *The local language expressed in the form of English.*

This is the English equivalent of expressions in the local language. For example, the register of the two village women, which is rich with African proverbs and idiomatic expressions. Below is an excerpt (5):

*1st W: Ah! And yet I thought I was alone in this...*

*The lonely woman who must toil  
From morn till eve,  
Before a morsel hits her teeth  
Or a drop of water cools her throat.*

*2nd W: My sister, you are not alone.*

*But who would have thought that I,  
Whose house is teeming with children,  
My own, my husband's, my sister's...  
But this is my curse.  
'Shall I do this when  
This and that have nothing to do?'  
No. And they all sit  
With their hands between their knees.  
If the courtyard must be swept,  
It is Aba's job.  
If the ampesi must be cooked,  
It is Aba's job.  
And since the common slave was away all day  
There was no drop in the pot  
To cool the parched throat.*

*I am telling you, my sister,  
Sometimes we feel you are luckier  
Who are childless.*

This is also the type of register used by other characters who do not use the English language, such as Esi Kom and Nana.

(d) *Actual words of the local language.*

Where the English equivalent is not appropriate, or where it cannot provide an accurate meaning, the local word or expression is used. For example, the use of the word *ampesi* in the example given under (c) above. Another example is the use of the word *Maami* for mother by Ato, when addressing his mother, Esi Kom.

### **3.5 Song**

Song plays a role in the proceedings of *Dilemma of a Ghost*. Monka says that Eulalie reminds her of the words in the song (29):

She is strange,  
She is unusual.  
She would have done murder  
Had she been a man.  
But to prevent  
Such an outrage  
They made her a woman!

However, the song entitled 'The Ghost' sung by the two village children is connected to the main thematic thread of Ato's dilemma (23-4):

One early morning,  
When the moon was up  
Shining as the sun,  
I went to Elmina Junction  
And there and there,  
I saw a wretched ghost  
Going up and down

Singing to himself  
‘Shall I go  
To Cape Coast,  
Or to Elmina  
I don’t know,  
I can’t tell.  
I don’t know,  
I can’t tell.’

The song thematises about Ato’s cultural detachment and schizophrenic personality. Although there is no indication that the song is accompanied by drums, it is nonetheless an example of how song is an important part of modern African drama.

#### **4.0 Reading the Signs**

*Dilemma of a Ghost* is, partly by virtue of being set in a village, permeated by culture and cultural conflicts. The sign-vehicles are related to the concepts of family, home, communality, individuality, respect for the elderly, hospitality, marriage.

#### **4.1 The Odumna Clan House**

*The Dilemma of a Ghost* is essentially about cultural conflict centred on events in the Odumna clan. The house is in fact the pivotal signifier of the three main forms of cultural conflict in the play. First, conflict between Eulalie and Ato’s family; second, between Ato and his family; third, between Ato and Eulalie. In general terms, however, the main conflict is due to interaction between traditional African and western culture. The physical description of the house, in fact, is in itself a signification of the conflicts. The house is described thus (ix):

It is enclosed on the right by a wall of the *old building* and both at the centre and on the left by the walls of the *new wing*. At the right hand corner a door links the courtyard with a passage that leads into the much bigger courtyard of the old house. In the middle of the left wall there is a door leading into the new rooms. A

terrace runs round the two sides of the new sector. In the foreground is the path which links the roads leading to the river, the farm and the market (italics mine).

The main features of the building are a new wing as well as an old one. This symbolises the conflict between the old way of doing things, or the Old Order, and the New Order. The old building signifies the traditions of the Fanti people as epitomised by custodians of traditional culture such as Nana and Esi Kom. The new building, on the other hand, signifies the new customs from the western world as epitomised by Eulalie and to some extent Ato. The new wing, in fact, is reserved for the 'exclusive use' of Ato whenever he visits the village (2).

It is important to note, however, that the two buildings are within the same courtyard and therefore connected. This signifies that, in the play, and by extension in Ghanaian life in general, old and new cultural forces have been compelled to interact in an antithetical relationship. At another level, the appearance of the Odumna clan house signifies the nature of Ato Yawson's cultural dilemma. Just like the house is a mix of old and new, Ato's personality is schizophrenic; he is neither totally westernised nor totally traditional. In other words, character exhibits traits of both the old and new ways of life.

At yet another level, the Odumna house signifies the centrality of the concepts of family and home in the play and Fanti culture. The fact that the new wing is reserved for Ato (and his wife) is indicative of the fact that he is not expected to disconnect himself from family while working in the city. Despite working and living in the city, Ato is expected, by tradition, to occasionally return 'home'. As in the case of the Makhaya family in *Nothing but the Truth*, therefore, family must never be allowed to disintegrate, and 'home' is not necessarily where one works or 'lives', but where one's roots are. For Siphon and Themba, the family roots are in the family house in New Brighton; for Ato, the family roots are in the Odumna clan house.

It is not far-fetched to state that the Odumna clan house symbolises the importance of family unity. Whenever the clan members have an important matter to discuss, they

gather at the house. Thus, for example, when they get concerned about Eulalie's apparent 'failure' to conceive, the Odumna family gather at the house to find a solution to the 'problem' (Act Four). The semiotic significance of the Odumna clan house also extends to the general environment in which it is located. According to the above passage above, the setting includes a path 'leading to the river, the farm and the market'. The house's proximity to the river, farm and market makes it a microcosm of the lifestyle and culture of the villagers, in much the same way that the Makhaya house in *Nothing but the Truth* is a microcosm of the general culture of New Brighton and the Chibesa Kunda village in *Black Mamba Two* is a microcosm of the general culture of Zambian villages.

The river, farm and market are all indispensable to traditional life, and they are all interconnected. All the three are associated with the preservation of life. Villagers draw water from the river for domestic use, as is demonstrated by the beginning of Act One, where we see the two village women 'returning from the river with their water pots on their heads' (5). It is also logical to conclude that the river is also used for bathing and irrigation of river-side farms.

The river is therefore indispensable to the survival of the villagers, as is the land on which they have farms. For villagers who have not had the opportunity, like Ato, to go to school, the only reliable alternative for survival is the land. The significance of land, of course, is not peculiar to *Dilemma of a Ghost*; it is equally important to the Africans in *Nothing but the Truth* and *Black Mamba Two*, who are dispossessed of their ancestral land by oppressive white regimes.

The land has not only provided the river to the villagers, but also the forest, which is also an important source of their livelihood. Thus, for example, at the beginning of Act Two, the two unnamed village women are seen 'returning from the woods where they have gathered some faggots' (16). The economy of the villagers, therefore, is essentially an agricultural one, hence the presence of the market in the vicinity. The market provides an outlet for selling farm produce, fish from the river, and meat. Thus, at the beginning of

Act Four, we yet again see the two village women ‘on their way from the market where they have bought fish, pig’s feet, seasoned beef, etc., for their evening *fufu*’ (33).

When we understand the nature of life and cultural norms associated with the Odumna clan house and Fanti traditional life, we are better placed to understand why Eulalie, who grew up in New York city, has problems adjusting to life in the village. There is a sharp environmental and cultural contrast between the village and Eulalie’s home in the United States of America despite the fact that by American standards and indeed her own standards her family is poor. There is equally a sharp contrast between the village and life in the city where Ato and Eulalie live.

The cultural context also enables us to put Ato’s dilemma in perspective. How can he, a man educated in the ‘new ways’ of the western world, fit in the old ways of the Odumna clan? Ato has difficulties drawing the line between old and new, hence his confusion and split personality. Furthermore, the Odumna house also makes it possible for us to have a better understanding of the various conflicts centred on the meaning of family, home, hospitality, marriage, womanhood and manhood, individuality and communality, private and public space, matriarchy and patriarchy.

(a) *Family*

In the Fanti cultural ethos, family interests transcend individual interests. Whatever the individual does must, ultimately, benefit and have the direct or indirect approval of the family. Even having children is not just a matter for a married couple; they must have children for the sake of the family. Thus, for example, in urging Ato to have a child with Eulalie, the emphasis is not so much on their marital happiness, but on the joy a newborn child would bring to the clan. Hence Petu, when presenting the family’s concerns about Ato’s childless marriage, says to him: ‘It was a couple of days ago that we [the family] met. What came out of the meeting is that we must come and ask you and your wife what is preventing you from giving your grandmother a great-grandchild before she leaves us [dies]’ (40).

This explains why the entire family converge at the clan house to ‘solve’ Ato’s ‘problem’ of a childless marriage. Typically, Eulalie does not appreciate the ‘family gathering’ and asks Ato, ‘But why so many people?’ (39). Aware of the fact that Ato and Eulalie might consider the intervention an unwelcome interference in their ‘private affairs’, Akroma, Ato’s younger uncle, says to him: ‘If I am not putting my mouth into an affair which does not concern me, may I ask where your wife is?’ (39) Nana does not see any need to be apologetic about a ‘family’ matter and says to Akroma, ‘Who says it is not your affair?’ and, immediately, to Petu, Ato’s elder uncle, ‘It is his [Akroma’s] affair, isn’t it?’ Mansa, Ato’s younger auntie, supports Nana: ‘If this isn’t your affair, whose affair is it? It’s everybody’s affair isn’t it?’ (39). Esi observes that ‘these days’ a son’s marriage affair ‘cannot always be one’s affair’ but Nana, the custodian of the family tradition, is quick to dismiss the view: ‘It may be so in many homes. Things have not changed here’ (39).

The failure by Eulalie, who is obviously unschooled in the ways and customs of the Fanti, to understand the pre-eminence of family interests over the marital interests of a couple is a source of serious conflict. For Ato, the problem is not that he does not understand the concept of family as perceived in the Fanti tradition; it is that he associates it with the old way of doing things which he would like to distance himself from, and about which he largely keeps Eulalie ignorant. Ato would like to please his wife even if it is at the expense of family harmony. He therefore places his marriage and wife above family, which, in Fanti culture, is taboo. He commits the taboo of marrying without obtaining the consent of his family. He does not even have the courtesy to at least consult them. Instead, he marries her in the western tradition in which marriage is between man and woman and all they need is to love each other, not the approval of their families.

It is only when we understand the centrality and sanctity of family in the Fanti culture that we see that Ato’s marriage amounts to a violation of the sanctity, not only of marriage, but also of family. What makes the violation worse is that he chooses to marry a descendant of American slaves. To the family, this is a disgrace, an affront to family honour (12-3). It is easy to see why Ato’s family feels insulted by his ‘western marriage’,

especially that Esi Kom had already assumed he would marry a local woman under the Fanti traditions. She had already sold her sheep in order to raise money for him to pay the bride price to the family of his future wife (10). Esi Kom and other family members cannot understand why their own son, for whom they sacrificed so much to educate, would be so ungrateful as to ignore them when deciding how to proceed on the marriage issue.

In the context of the clan, Ato is not just Esi's son; he is 'everybody's' son in the sense that he belongs to the clan, hence Akyere, his elder auntie, refers to him as 'my son' (12). Despite his age, Ato is, to the elderly members of his family, a 'child'. From the cultural perspective, however, this is not meant to demean him, but rather to remind him of his position in the clan relative to the elderly people such as his aunties, mother and grandmother.

In fact, Nana sometimes refers to him as 'child' and 'my grand-child'. Thus, for example, she says, 'My grand-child has gone and brought home the offspring of slaves' (13). Earlier, she tells Esi Kom to 'leave that child alone' (9). Similarly, Petu, Ato's elder uncle, says to the women during the family gathering to welcome Ato home: 'But women, can you not wait for us to finish what we came here to say? The child has just come from a journey' (10).

For his part, Ato refers to his aunties as his 'mothers', as when he says to his uncle Petu when parting: 'Thank you, my Uncle. When you go, tell my mothers that we will be coming to see them this evening' (25). Ato also refers to the clan as 'my people', a tendency for which Eulalie mocks him as the cultural conflict heightens (44):

Ain't you going teh say Poor Sweetie Pie? Ain't I poorer here as I would ave been in New York City? (*In pathetic imitation of Ato*) 'Eulalie, my people say it is not good for a woman to take alcohol. Eulalie, my people say they are not pleased to see you smoke... Eulalie, my people say... My people... My people...' Damned rotten coward of a Moses. (*Ato winces.*) I have been drinking in spite of what

your people say. (*She sits on the terrace facing the audience.*) Who married me, you or your goddam people?

In her ignorance and naivety, Eulalie does not understand the gravity of what she is saying and its implications on her relationship with Ato and his family.

Bereavement in the home of any member of the clan is bereavement for the whole clan. Thus, for example, Ato and his wife are expected, by custom and conventional wisdom, to go to church and attend the Thanksgiving Service of his cousin who had died the previous year. Eulalie is amused by the very idea of attending a service of a cousin who is not only unknown to Ato, but is, in fact, not even close because he is 'fourth removed' (43). Again she fails to see the importance attached to family bereavement in the Fanti culture.

In part, this is because, to the Fanti, death is not an end in itself, but a means to an end, a mere passage to the world of the ancestors. Hence, death is not disconnection from family; it is, on the contrary, only a disconnection from the physical family but a reconnection with the ancestral family in the next world. Family, therefore, does not end; it continues even in death. Thus, the dead must be buried with respect, which is another way of saying they should be given an honourable send-off as they go to meet the ancestors. To honour the dead is to honour the ancestors, and this is why it is taboo for Ato to fail to attend a dead cousin's memorial, even if such a cousin is distant ('fourth removed').

Nana sees her own death as a passage to the land of the world of the ancestors. She is concerned that she must meet them with pride and happiness when her death comes. Hence she fears that Ato's decision to marry the offspring of slaves would be difficult to explain to the ancestors (14):

My spirit Mother ought to have come for me earlier. Now what shall I tell them who are gone? The daughter of slaves who come from the white man's land. Someone should advise me on how to tell my story. My children, I am dreading my arrival there where they will ask me news of home. Shall I tell them or shall I

not? Someone should lend me a tongue light enough with which to tell my Royal Dead that one of their stock has gone away and brought to their sacred precincts the wayfarer!..They will ask me where I was when such things were happening. It is revealing that Nana refers to the clan house as the 'sacred precincts'. What Ato has done is abominable; he has committed the taboo of desecrating the sacredness of family, as Themba does in *Nothing but the Truth*. He has sown the seed of disunity among his people.

In the Fanti tradition, family means loyalty and respect for one another. It also means carrying each other's burden even if it entails sacrificing one's resources. Thus, for example, the family had to sacrifice its resources to educate Ato (31), and he is therefore expected, in turn, and as appreciation, to take care of the needs of the family. Hence, when the two village women discuss the suffering of Esi Kom (despite the fact that her son is back from studies and working in the city), the 1<sup>st</sup> Woman says of Ato: 'Shall he [Ato]not help to look after his nephews and nieces when it was somebody else who looked after him in the days of his childhood? You talk, my sister, as if the days are gone when the left hand washed the right and the right hand washed the left' (17).

(b) *Home*

As far as the Odumna clan is concerned, Ato's home is not his house in the city, but the clan house in the village. His roots are not buried in the soil of the city or New York City, but in the land of the Odumna clan. Home is not just where one is born, but the source of life and its true meaning. Thus, while Ato's clan is not opposed to his working in the city, they do not expect him to fail to visit the village. Hence the decision to build new quarters where he should be staying whenever he comes to the village. However, Ato is to some extent disconnected from his roots because of his failure to observe true fidelity to the ways of his people. It is for this reason that he fails to help his wife connect to his people. How can he teach her customs he does not himself appreciate?

(c) *Marriage*

Apart from being a family affair, marriage, in the Fanti cultural set-up, as in most African societies, can only find its essence when it produces children. Indeed, if marriage is for the propagation of the family, then children must be born and brought up to continue the family line by also producing their own children. In the Fanti cultural context, therefore, a childless marriage serves no purpose and is a source of worry for the family. Thus, when no child is forthcoming from Ato's marriage because of family planning, his family assume his wife is barren and therefore attempt to help the couple out with traditional medicine.

Petu's statement to Ato underlines the traditional perspective of marriage as a venture aimed at producing children (41): 'When two people marry, everyone expects them to have children. For men and women marry *because they want children*' (emphasis mine). Petu cannot see any other reason for marriage; love is not an adequate reason for marrying. For Eulalie and Ato, on the other hand, what is paramount is marital happiness, not children. Thus, whereas to Petu children are a *sine qua non* for a successful marriage, for Ato and Eulalie the *sine qua non* is mutual love.

It is because of this perspective that Ato thinks the happiness of his wife is more important than that of his people. He is prepared to postpone having children, and therefore risk a conflict with his people, than to have children at the expense of his wife's happiness. He reassures her he will not insist on having children before she is ready to have them (4):

*ATO: 'Lalie, don't you believe me when I tell you it's O.K.? I love you, Eulalie, and that's what matters. Your own sweet self should be O.K. for any guy. And how can a first-born child be difficult to please? Children, who wants them? In fact, they will make me jealous. I couldn't bear seeing you love someone else better than you do me. Not yet, darling, and not even my own children.'*

*ELALIE: You really sure?*

*ATO: Aren't you the sweetest and loveliest things in Africa and America rolled together? My darling, we are going to create a paradise, with or without children.*

*EULALIE: Darling, some men do mind a lot.*

*ATO: (Vehemently) Look at me, we shall postpone having children for as long you would want.*

Ato of course is being insincere about the realities of life in Africa. Eulalie appears to have an idea about the importance of married couples having children in Africa, but he assures her that everything will be fine. Even when, later, she tells him she has the 'feeling' that they should have a baby, he responds, '... I think we better stick to our original plans' (22). On the issue of children Ato is insincere both to his wife and his family. To his wife, because he gives her a false assurance; to his family, because he does not tell them the truth about his 'childless' marriage – that is, he does not tell them that he and his wife have merely postponed having their first child.

It is significant that Ato's family suspect that Eulalie is barren, even without any proof. This reflects the fact that, in many African societies the woman is the first suspect in a childless marriage. Thus, Ato's family prepares a concoction of herbs to treat her of the barrenness. A barren woman easily becomes a subject of gossip in the village. Thus, for example, the two village women discuss Eulalie's situation, although, ironically, the 1st Woman is in fact childless herself (35):

*1st W: Has she given birth to a child since they married?*

*2nd W: No, my sister, it seems as if the stranger-woman is barren.*

*1st W: Barren?*

*2nd W: As an orange which has been scooped of all fruit? But it is enough, my sister.*

The 1st Woman sympathises with Eulalie for being 'childless' (35-6):

Barren!

If it is real barrenness,

Then, oh stranger-girl,

Whom I do not know,

I weep for you.  
For I know what it is  
To start a marriage with barrenness...  
They want people.  
My people have a lusty desire  
To see the tender skin  
On top of a child's scalp  
Rise and fall with human life...  
For my world  
Which you have run to enter  
Is most unkind to the barren.

(d) *Womanhood and Manhood*

In the Fanti ethos, as in most African cultures, true womanhood is only realised through motherhood. In other words, the female is expected to follow a clear path of development. From girlhood to womanhood and finally, motherhood. In other words, a girl grows up with the expectation of becoming a woman; the woman expects to become a wife; the wife expects to become a mother.

Similarly, a male child is expected to develop from a boy into a man, from a man into a husband; and from a husband into a father. Just like the ultimate goal of womanhood is motherhood, so also the ultimate goal of manhood is fatherhood. From this perspective, therefore, Ato's manhood and Eulalie's womanhood are incomplete without having a child. In addition, a barren woman is not considered to be valuable, as the 1<sup>st</sup> Woman's expression of pity for Eulalie eloquently demonstrates. If the essence of marriage is to produce children and thereby contribute to the propagation of the family, then a childless marriage is of no value to the family. Neither can it bring fulfillment to the man and woman.

On the other hand, true womanhood in the context of the play is associated with hard work, which in turn is associated with tilling the land, making trips to the river to draw

water, cooking by the fireside, and looking after the family in general. Hence the two village women, as well as the women of Ato's family, doubt Eulalie's worth as a woman because she lives in the city where they use 'machines' to do things that a hardworking woman should have no trouble doing.

In reference to the refrigerator and stove, the 2nd Woman says that Eulalie spends all her money on 'cigarettes, drinks, clothes and *machines*' (34, emphasis mine).

*1st W: Machines?*

*2nd W: Yes, machines.*

*Her water must be cooler than hailstone.*

*I heard it said in the market place*

*Monka's teeth were set on edge*

*For drinking water in her house.*

*And her food never knows wood fire.*

*1st W: Does she tear at it uncooked?*

*2nd W: As for you, my sister!*

*She uses machines.*

*This woman uses machines for doing everything.*

Eulalie's apparent laziness and barrenness are not the only reasons her worth as a woman is being brought into question. Her behaviour in general is considered 'unwoman-like'. Ato's family do not approve of her habitual drinking and smoking, which they associate with being a man. Akyere, Ato's elder auntie, says of Eulalie (41): 'Who does not know she smokes cigarettes? And who has not heard that she can cut a drink as well as any man?' The woman should be associated instead with back-breaking domestic chores, child-bearing and feeding the family.

The Fanti ethos is associated with gender-role stereotyping. A woman has a place, so does the man. Esi Kom, for example, makes it clear to Ato that tasks to do with food are for women, not men, when she brings him and Eulalie some snails for food. As the snails are wrapped in sack cloth, Ato asks Esi Kom about the contents, to which she responds:

‘Cannot your wife herself go and see? After all, these are all women’s affairs. Or do our masters, the Scholars, know what goes on in their wives’ kitchen (26)?

In other words, it is as much a taboo for Ato to concern himself with ‘women’s affairs’ as it is for Eulalie to do what only men are expected to do. Ato, like Eulalie, must adhere to his side of the gender divide, which is strictly enforced. Thus, for example, on the day of the ceremony of the ‘Sprinkling of the Stools’, Petu urges Ato to attend the event with his wife. However, when Ato assures him he and Eulalie would come, Petu reminds him of the need to associate more with the men than his wife: ‘But you are a man. So you must come and drink with the men first’ (37).

Ato’s family finds it hard to appreciate his gestures of love and care toward Eulalie, which they interpret as a sign of weakness on his part. Thus, for instance, when the family members gather with the intention of discussing Ato’s childless marriage, the chairs are not adequate for all the men. The women, as per tradition, do not normally sit on chairs. They sit round the terrace. When Ato and Eulalie come out of their quarters to join the family only one chair remains – for Ato, of course, as Eulalie is expected to sit on the terrace together with the other women. However, instead of showing Eulalie where to sit on the terrace, Ato decides to give her his chair. This draws expressions of shock from family members. They do not understand Ato’s reasoning. What he thinks is an expression of love and tender care toward his wife is interpreted as weakness and unmanly behaviour by the family. His worth as a man is therefore questioned.

Ato, however, is caught between two conflicting images of manhood. On the one hand, Eulalie expects him as the ‘man of the house’ and loving husband to stand up to his family and protect her. On the other hand, the family’s image of a real man is that of someone who does not show weakness to his wife. Ato is expected to control his wife, not vice versa. Hence, when Eulalie throws away the sack of snails, Esi, offended, challenges her son: ‘What kind of man are you growing into? Are your wife’s taboos yours? Rather your taboos should be hers’ (28). It is, perhaps, due to Ato’s indecision as

to how to treat his wife, whether from the western or traditional perspective, that he ends up losing control of himself and striking her (45) after an argument about child-bearing.

The fact that Ato slaps Eulalie on the cheek and then walks away from the scene is possibly an indication of his inner struggle with the question of whether to be the traditional African husband or the modern, westernised one. The slap signifies his frustration and the urge, within his subconscious, to control his wife as per tradition; but his walking away from the scene also signifies his regret at what he has done, which contradicts the principles of modern love. Indeed, Ato later regrets his action.

True manhood, however, is not just the antithesis of womanhood: it is also associated with hard work. Since hard work, in the context of the village, is defined in terms of the land, Petu assumes that Ato must be lazy because he does not till the land. When he meets Ato while on his way home from the farm, he says to him: 'And as you know, some of us are not lucky enough *to be paid only to sit in an office doing nothing*. And that is why I have to relieve the wayside herbs of their dew every morning' (emphasis mine). Ato quickly defends himself: 'But my Uncle, we too work hard' (25). Overall, manhood is associated with power and authority while womanhood is associated with subservience to men. The woman must obey and please the man, and pleasing him ultimately means giving him children.

(e) *Matriarchy and Patriarchy*

Power and authority, however, are not only associated with manhood. There is also a link between the amount of authority and power one wields and age. In the Fanti culture, as illustrated by the play, matriarchs and patriarchs have more authority and are revered more than the young. It is taboo to challenge an older person, or to question their wisdom.

Whereas generally it is the men who wield the power in the play, Nana plays a significant matriarchal role because of her advanced age. She wields some authority in the clan, although the ultimate power belongs to the men, especially the elders of the clan. This

explains why Petu, Ato's elder uncle, being the oldest man in the family, takes the leading role in family discussions. He is therefore tasked to deliver the family's message to Ato regarding the 'problem' of childlessness in his marriage (39-40).

Nana wields some authority because of the respect given to the old. Hence she is reverently referred to as 'Old One' (8-9) by members of the family, including Petu. However, as a woman she still shows respect for the eldest men, Petu and Akroma, by referring to them as 'my Royal Ones' (8). As the matriarch of the family, Nana does not understand the insolence demonstrated by her grandson Ato and his wife. His decision to marry without the family's consent, and for that matter an offspring of slaves, is, as far as Nana is concerned, an affront to both the living and the dead custodians of the Fanti ethos. This explains why she 'spits significantly' (12) when she learns of the marriage.

Generally, however, the young must respect the elderly. For this reason Esi feels insulted by Eulalie's decision to dispose of the snails she gives wholeheartedly out of a spirit of hospitality. In the context of the Fanti ethos, it is wrong to reject a gift given as a gesture of hospitality, especially from one's own mother, let alone mother-in-law.

(f) *Individuality and Communalism*

In the Fanti tradition, the emphasis on family over the individual makes communalism more important than individuality. On the other hand, for Eulalie individualism is a central trait of life in the western world. She therefore has difficulties adjusting her individualistic approach to life to the communal lifestyle of the village. Eulalie finds it difficult to accept the idea that she should subordinate her interests to those of the clan or village community. This is a source of serious conflict between her and Ato, as well as between her and Ato's family. In utter frustration she complains to Ato (45): 'I shall say anything I like. I am right tired. I must always do things to please you and your folks... What about the sort of things I like? Aren't they gotten any meaning to this rotten land?'

However, the spirit of collectivity is not just peculiar to the Odumna clan. It is in fact a characteristic of the entire village community. This is demonstrated in the amount of

interest the two village women have in the affairs of the Odumna clan. They sympathise with Esi for all her troubles. It is not surprising, therefore, that when they hear mourning coming from the Odumna clan house, they get out of their houses and, assuming old Nana has died, decide to start weeping and go to the funeral house. However, as it turns out, Nana is alive (13). It is noteworthy that the two women make the 'funeral' their own even before knowing what is actually going on. This is communality at work because, in this community, one person's funeral is everybody's funeral.

(g) *Private and Communal Space*

In the individualistic western culture, private space is critical and is guarded like sacred ground. Everyone is expected to respect the individual's right to privacy.

In a communal type of lifestyle such as in Ato's village, however, the distinction between private and communal or public space can be blurred. Eulalie, therefore, feels that her private space as an individual and a wife is being violated by Ato's family. From a proxemic point of view, therefore, it is critical to note the fact that actions which Eulalie considers violations of the sanctity of private space are considered normal in the communal and family-centred lifestyle of the village. Thus, for example, when the members of the family gather outside her sleeping quarters in the new wing of the Odumna house, she expresses surprise at seeing so many people, especially that there was no prior warning about their coming. She asks, 'But why so many people?' (39). After a whispered discussion with Ato, away from earshot, she walks away from the family gathering into her room. This signifies her inner wish for private space, and the least she can do to reclaim the sanity of her private space is to 'hide' in the privacy of her room and keep a distance. Proxemically, the further away she keeps from the gathering, the more private space she reclaims for herself.

A more direct violation of private space occurs when Esi brings snails for the Eulalie and Ato to take with them back to the city. Without any sense of guilt or inhibition, Esi opens the door to Ato's apartment, without even knocking, and places the two bundles of snails in the outer room. As she closes the door to leave, Ato and Eulalie enter the courtyard

and see her. Eulalie is offended by the sight of her mother-in-law leaving their quarters. She turns to Ato and asks (26): ‘Ato, would you care to ask your mother what she wants in our room?’ What makes the situation worse is that Esi brings snails without asking Eulalie and Ato whether or not they would like to have the snails. From Eulalie’s perspective, therefore, this is not only a violation of private space but also of individuality.

## 4.2 Properties

### (a) *Water Pots and Firewood*

The water pot and firewood are semiotically linked to the concept of womanhood. This is because true womanhood is partly defined in terms of how hardworking a woman is.

The water pot is linked to the river, from where the women in the village draw their water, which is used for domestic purposes such as cooking, washing clothes and bathing. The first time we meet the two village women, at the beginning of Act One, they are returning to the village from the river with water pots on their heads. The image of the village woman with the water pot on her head is associated with hard work. In other words, the woman has to walk to the river, which might not necessarily be near the village, draw the water, then walk back the same distance, only with a heavy load on her head.

The water pot is also an indirect indictment of Eulalie, whose womanhood is questioned by the village women as well as Ato’s family. The image of the village women walking back to the village with water pots on their heads stands in sharp contrast to Eulalie’s image of a woman. While the village women have to go through some trouble and effort to get water, Eulalie only has to turn the tap in her house to get the water. The contrast becomes even more vivid when we compare the water pot-carrying women to Eulalie with a sunhat on her head; for she carries a sunhat with her to the village. At the beginning of Act Three, we are told that Eulalie’s sunhat is ‘lying on a chair in the courtyard’ (23). Eulalie wears the sunhat to protect her face from the heat of the sun. On the other hand, the village women are tough enough to endure the sun’s heat. In the village, being a real woman means being able to endure difficulties and to carry out hard

tasks. Thus, while the 'real' woman places her family's comfort above her comfort, Eulalie places her own comfort first.

The contrast does not end here. Eulalie uses a 'machine' (refrigerator) to cool the drinking water; and as far as the village women are concerned this is a sign of laziness. In fact, they tease Eulalie, saying she uses a machine to make her water 'colder than hailstone' (34). However, the women also tease Eulalie for using a 'machine' (that is, stove) to cook. The 2nd Woman says that Eulalie's food 'never knows wood fire' (34). In other words, as far as they and their village community are concerned, true womanhood also means being able, as a wife or mother, to venture into the forest to collect faggots. The faggots serve the same purpose as the water pots. They signify the ideal hardworking village woman. While Eulalie uses the stove, the village woman has to use wood to prepare food. From the perspective of the villagers, using the stove is effortless, while using firewood is a more demanding process.

(b) *Nana's Stick*

Nana's walking stick is an extension of her character. It signifies the authority that goes with old age in a traditional African society. The stick is not just a means of supporting Nana as she walks, but also a sign and symbol of her matriarchal role in the clan. Thus, for example, during the family gathering to discuss Ato's 'childless' marriage, Nana uses the stick to emphasise her belief in the role of family in the affairs of married couples. When Esi indicates that family members might not intervene in the affairs of modern married couples, Nana categorically says, 'It may be so in many homes. Things have not changed here.' She demonstrates her seriousness by knocking her stick on the ground (39). The knocking of the ground with the stick lends finality to her argument.

Characteristically Ato rejects the family's intervention, drawing a sharp reaction from members of his family. They all walk out on him as a way of demonstrating their disgust. The walk out signifies the 'disconnect' or 'distance' between Ato and his family. It also signifies his cultural isolation. As she walks out, Esi Kom turns back and 'stares at Ato for a long time' (42), her arms akimbo. However, Nana turns back and urges Esi to move.

However, the old woman does not utter any word; instead, she uses her stick to make Esi move. In other words, Esi recognises authority behind the stick and obeys without delay.

(c) *Sack of Snails*

In Act Three Esi Kom brings some snails wrapped in sackcloth to Ato's home. She would like him and Eulalie to take the snails with them when they return to the city. However, Eulalie rejects the idea of eating snails, let alone keeping them in their sleeping quarters at the clan house. She therefore decides to discard them (27-8). The sack, therefore, could be said to signify the Fanti culture which Eulalie cannot adapt to and rejects. Instead of making an effort to eat, or at least to learn to cook, the snails, she chooses to discard of them. She reacts in a similar manner to the sound of the drums. When, in Act Two, she hears the village drums roll, she 'throws away her cigarette, her eyes pop out... really scared' (20). She mistakes the roll of the drums for witch-hunting.

The irony of her reaction is not lost on Ato, who reminds her that the drum was one of the aspects of African culture that attracted her to the continent (20). In other words, she had looked forward to learning more about the African culture. She says to Ato in the play's Prelude as the two prepare to return to Ghana, 'I'm optimistic Native Boy. To belong to somewhere again... Sure, this must be bliss' (3). To Eulalie, it seems, getting married to Ato is an opportunity to return to the land from which her ancestors were taken as slaves hundreds of years earlier. Africa is the 'native' land, hence her propensity to fondly refer to Ato as 'Native Boy'. As a matter of fact, just before the drums sound, Eulalie is seated on the terrace, relaxing and enjoying the atmosphere. 'So at last here am I in Africa' (18).

That Eulalie hopes to 'belong to somewhere again' is also a reflection of her identity crisis as an African-American, for, although she has African ancestry, she does not understand African culture. Though his comments are debatable, Liyong says of the African-American:

The Negro is a unique creature. He is of Africa; and yet not quite. He is of Europe; and yet not quite. He is of America; and yet not quite. But he combines these three disparate strands in his constitution. The confusion which ensues from

this combination is the root of all his problems. In these late days of race pride, he has just awakened to the search for racial, cultural, and historical roots. Hastily, he is likely to pounce on Africa. If he sticks to that, and that only, he is mistaken. For, although African slaves were transported to America three or four hundred years ago, they were no longer African entirely. Europe, America and the seas determined their fates... I have never come across a Negro who looks, talks, behaves, thinks like a full African. (1969: 83)

Eulalie's exaggerated reaction to both the snails and the drums signifies, ultimately, her failure to adapt to the culture of her new 'family'. She is however conscious of the possibility of being accused of what she herself refers to as 'unadaptability' (28).

(d) *Cigarettes, Lighter, Ash Tray, Bottles of Coca-Cola and Gin*

If the sack of snails represents African culture, then Eulalie's cigarettes, lighter, ash tray, and bottle of Coca-cola and gin represent the western culture in which she grew up. To her, drinking and smoking are normal female behaviour. Coming from an individualistic culture, she has difficulty discarding of her smoking and drinking habits. However, these items also signify a refuge for her. Trapped in a culturally 'hostile' environment, she turns to drinking and smoking to comfort herself.

Thus, for example, upon returning from the ritual of the Sprinkling of the Stools and expressing her disgust with the custom, she 'goes into the room and returns with a glass of whisky and, as usual, a packet of cigarettes and a lighter' (37). Similarly, when Eulalie and Ato quarrel with Esi and Monka over the rejected snails, Eulalie withdraws from the situation into herself, puffing at a cigarette (29).

### 4.3 Costume

(a) *Ato's Traditional Cloth*

In Act Four we read that Ato comes out of his room wearing traditional cloth 'for the first time' (37). It is the occasion of the Sprinkling of the Stools, a ritual whose purpose is explained by Petu (40): '...On this day we try to drive away all evil spirits, ill luck and unkind feelings which might have invaded our house during the past year. You know

also, that we invoke our sacred dead to bring us blessings.’ The cloth signifies Ato’s schizophrenic character in the sense that, while he attends the ceremony, he does not really believe in it. He demonstrates an ambiguous commitment to the customs of his people, the very customs in which he grew up before going abroad for studies. By contrast, Eulalie demonstrates no such ambivalence because she is decidedly opposed to what she calls ‘savage customs and standards’ (44).

Despite attending the performance of the ritual, in fact, Eulalie still holds reservations about it, especially that the sprinkling of the clan house with concoctions such as mashed yam (oto) leaves ‘a blasted mess’ (37). Upon returning to her room after the ritual, Eulalie ‘surveys the courtyard with disgust’ (37). (In fact, she leaves the venue of the ritual earlier than Ato.) With contempt she says, ‘I suppose folks must have their customs. Though if you ask me, I think there has been enough messing around for one day’ (37).

Ato’s participation in the ritual of the Sprinkling of the Stools is an act of convenience, not of commitment and belief. It is a public relations stunt meant to deceive his people into thinking he respects their customs and tradition, especially after they condemned him for marrying Eulalie, who is not only non-Fanti but also non-African and a descendant of slaves. In reality, however, the apparent commitment is only a veneer, since a piece of cloth can be worn and then removed. There is an element of impermanence about the cloth. Thus, Ato puts on and takes off Fanti customs according to convenience.

Ato’s wearing of the cloth appears to deceive his family into thinking it is a sign of his commitment to the customs and traditions of the clan. This is because, soon after the ritual is performed, the family members gather at Ato’s quarters to conduct the contentious fertility ritual. Ato of course rejects the ritual, insisting that Eulalie has no conception difficulties. However, this is not the only time that Ato wears traditional attire. The next morning after the attempted fertility ritual, a Sunday, we see Ato wearing a ‘mourning cloth’ (43). The occasion is the Thanksgiving church service for a distant cousin of his who had died the previous year. Ato wears the attire for the same reasons

that he wears the ritual attire – to give the impression that there is no disconnect between him and his roots.

(b) *Eulalie's Sunhat*

Apart from serving as an indictment against Eulalie's womanhood, the sunhat also signifies the defensive mechanism. In other words, just as it is a protection against the sun, the sunhat also signifies 'protection' from a hostile cultural environment.

#### 4.4 Characters

(a) *Ato*

Ato symbolises cultural ambivalence and detachment from one's roots. In this regard he is similar to Themba of *Nothing but the Truth*. He is trapped between past and present, between tradition and modernity. Ato's dilemma is worsened by his lack of firmness. He tries as much to please his family as to please his wife. However, he vainly thinks he can please both sides without compromising his personal integrity – an impossible outcome, seeing he has to be dishonest to both sides in order to keep their trust. Thus, for example, while he pretends to Eulalie that he does not mind their postponing having their first child, he equally pretends to his family, allowing them to believe that the reason his marriage is childless is because Eulalie is incapable of conceiving.

Ato's predicament is reflected in the title of the play, *The Dilemma of a Ghost*, because, in effect, the dilemma of choice faced by the ghost in the children's song is the same kind of dilemma faced by Ato. Which way should he go? Should he cling to his wife at the expense of and to the detriment of family ties? Or should he choose family honour and loyalty to the demise of his marriage?

Ato also resembles the ghost in another sense – it is not reality. The ghost represents a dead being. It is what remains of the actual physical entity that no longer exists. In fact, Ato is now a 'ghost' of his former self. The young man who was once committed to his people and their customs no longer exists. He is 'dead'. What remains is a different Ato, a mere 'ghost' of the 'dead' Ato. This view is given credence by the ending of the play.

Ato enacts the dilemma of the ghost in the children's song, whose words now come from his own mind rather than from the children in the dream (50):

...he crosses to his own door, pauses for a second, then runs back towards the door leading to the family house, stands there for some time and finally moves to the middle of the courtyard. He looks bewildered and lost. Then suddenly, like an echo from his own mind the voices of the children break out.

Shall I go to Cape Coast

Shall I go to Elmina?

I can't tell

Shall I?

I can't tell

I can't tell

I can't tell

I can't tell...

Ato's ghost-self draws comparisons with Themba's ash remains in *Nothing but the Truth*. The ghost has no more value than the physical entity it represents, in much the same way that the ash has no more value than the body from which it is produced.

Chevalier and Gheerbrant (1996: 49) confirm this view:

Ashes derive their symbolism first from the fact that they are pre-eminently a residue – what remains after the fire goes out – hence, anthropocentrically, what remains of the body after life is extinguished. In spiritual terms what remains is valueless, thus from the eschatological point of view, ashes symbolize the nullity of human life, deriving from its transcendence.

The ghost, like the ash, has no value in itself except only in relation to the entity it represents.

(b) *Eulalie*

Eulalie signifies the fact that African and western culture cannot co-exist as long as they do not have respect for each other. The conflict in the play is compounded by the fact that Eulalie finds it difficult to adapt to the Fanti culture and has little regard, if any, for the

customs and beliefs of Ato's family. Eulalie rejects anything that does not fit into her expectations and cultural orientation. She epitomises the ignorance that characterises the western world in as far as issues on Africa are concerned. Clearly her view of Africa is a romanticised one which is antithetical to the reality of life in Africa.

In fact, before Eulalie arrives in Africa she talks of it as if she were a tourist. She associates Africa with 'palm trees, the azure sea, the sun and golden beaches' (3). Ato tries to correct her (3): 'Steady, woman. Where did you get hold of a tourist brochure? There are no palm trees where we will live. There are coconut trees... coconut palms, though. Unless of course if I take you to see my folks at home. There are real palm trees there.'

Eulalie's romanticised view of Africa makes her eager to get to the continent. She expresses her optimism to Ato: 'I'm optimistic, Native Boy. To belong to somewhere again... Sure, this must be bliss' (3). She looks forward to being assimilated by Ato's family, but on her own terms. Eulalie's naivety comes out clearly when in the following dialogue with Ato (3-4):

*EULALIE: ... Ato, can't your Ma be sort of my Ma too?*

*ATO: (Slowly and uncertainly) Sure she can.*

*EULALIE: And your Pa mine?*

*ATO: Sure. (Following lines solemn, like a prayer) And all my people your people...*

*EULALIE: And your gods my gods?*

*ATO: Yes.*

*EULALIE: Shall I die where you will die?*

*ATO: Yes... And if you want to, you shall be buried there also.*

Eulalie would like to 'reconnect' with her African roots, but her wish only has sentimental and symbolic value because she fails to adapt to the real Africa which turns out to be very different from the idealised Africa she had in mind. However, she cannot attain full reconnection to Africa because she does not know which village her ancestors were taken from, her ancestors having been torn from the African continent and taken to

the Americas among millions others, for the actual numbers, as Davidson (1961: 79), are unknown.

Eulalie, like other descendants of African slaves, has no 'tribe' to identify with, a fact which makes Nana aptly compare her to a tree without roots when Ato tells the family about his marriage to her (11): 'She has no tribe? The story you are telling us it too sweet, my grand-child. Since I was born, I have not heard of a human being born out from the womb of a woman who has no tribe. Are there trees which never have any roots?'

(c) *Nana*

Nana is the opposite of Eulalie. She epitomises commitment and fidelity to the Fanti ethos. She knows no culture but that of the Fanti, and has no respect for other cultures, particularly western culture as epitomised by Eulalie. Nana is as much a symbol of African cultural rigidity as Eulalie is of western cultural rigidity. Her views are hardened, not softened, by her advanced age. As a matriarch she is a custodian of Fanti customs and norms.

(d) *Petu*

Petu is an epitome of the patriarchal power which underlies the main conflicts of the play. The Odumna clan is man-centred and man-controlled. Nana may have some degree of authority by virtue of her advanced age, but she has less authority than the men, and certainly has no real power in terms of leadership of the clan. Petu, as the eldest living man in the clan, is automatically the leader. He therefore leads the family discussions, such as when the family members gather at Ato's quarters to discuss his 'childless' marriage. He is the one with the burden of guiding the discussions. Thus, when the women disturb the proceedings by making 'noise', Petu uses his power to control the situation: 'You must all be quiet.' He advises the gathering, by way of a proverb, to be careful and thorough with the way they handle the matter at hand: 'One must take time to dissect an ant in order to discover its entrails' (10).

While Petu is firm with the women, as is expected of a Fanti man, Ato aspires to be a 'gentleman' in the western sense of the word. Thus, when Eulalie finds no chair to sit on during the family discussion (and she is expected to sit on the terrace with the other women), Ato gives her his chair and instead sits on the terrace. This surprises the family members, and Petu asks Ato, 'And where shall you sit?' When he indicates that he will sit on the terrace, there is a general expression of shock among the family members. Ironically, however, it is Ato's failure to be firm and decisive like Petu that largely contributes to his dilemma. He is not courageous enough to tell his family and his wife the truth.

## **5.0 Conclusion**

In this chapter we have focused on cultural issues in *The Dilemma of a Ghost* and their role in the development of the story in general and the play's conflicts in particular. We have also highlighted the relationship between the various sign-vehicles and the various dramatic elements such as the properties and characters. In the next chapter we shall focus on the semiotic analysis of Ngugi's *The Black Hermit*.

## CHAPTER SEVEN: Analysis of *The Black Hermit*

### 1.0 General Introduction

In Chapter Six we were presented with the analysis of Christina Ama Ata Aidoo's *The Dilemma of a Ghost* which, like John Kani's *Nothing but the Truth*, is in part concerned with cultural conflict between people of different nationalities. In the former the conflict was between Eulalie, the protagonist's African-American wife, and his people, or family. On the other hand, in *Nothing but the Truth*, there is a conflict emanating from cultural differences between Sipho and his late brother's wife and daughter, Mandisa. In *The Black Hermit* the intercultural conflict manifests itself through interaction in the interracial relationship between Remi, the protagonist, and Jane, his white girlfriend. While the previous chapter focused on a West African setting, *The Black Hermit* is rooted in an East African setting. This fact notwithstanding, this chapter will, at various appropriate stages of analysis, draw our attention to the intertextual links between *The Black Hermit* and (any of) the other plays.

### 2.0 Introduction

According to Ngugi wa Thiong'o, *The Black Hermit* was written in response to two specific influences. First, the demand, by citizens of newly independent African states, for plays that responded to the aesthetic preferences of African audiences. During the colonial period, and shortly after independence, African theatre lovers were subjected, largely, to watching plays of foreign origin. When Uganda became independent in 1962, however, the Ugandan people demanded 'a break with the past' (Ngugi 1968: viii) of watching European plays. Ngugi wrote *The Black Hermit* in response to the demand, and it was first produced at the Uganda National Theatre in November 1962.

The second influence was the deep-seated feeling by Ngugi and other university students that 'tribalism was the biggest problem besetting the new East African countries' (1968: viii). While having faith in the new African governments, Ngugi and his fellow university students were concerned that the effort to build new states would be hampered by lack of

unity among the citizens. 'All the people had to do was to co-operate. All we had to do was to expose and root out the cantankerous effects of tribalism, racialism and religious factions' (viii).

Ultimately, therefore, in writing *The Black Hermit*, Ngugi sought to address the problem of disunity in the newly independent states resulting from tribalism, racialism and religious fanaticism. Therefore, in dealing with the cultural conflict between Remi and Jane, Ngugi ultimately seeks to enlighten us about the evils of tribalism and racialism. It is because of his wish to escape from the burden of disunity in the village that Remi decides to become a hermit in the city. By the end of the play, however, Remi discovers that being a hermit is not a solution to the problem of disunity as manifested through tribalism, racialism and religious factionalism. He realises the divisions are real and deep, and can only be removed by directly confronting them rather than running away from them.

### **3.0 *The Black Hermit* as Contemporary African Drama**

#### **3.1 Subject and Themes**

Although the play concerns itself with the three-pronged problem of tribalism, racialism and religious factionalism in newly independent African states, it ultimately does not offer solutions to the disunity. On the contrary, it highlights the fact that the three forms of division, especially tribalism, could destroy the new African states. The play suggests that there is a thin line of distinction between commitment and loyalty to one's tribe and tribalism. In fact, the latter results from the former. Tribalism is indeed the open sore of many African states, even many years after independence, and is therefore a common subject in modern African plays. Racial and religious conflicts are also a common feature of modern African dramatic texts. Any African can identify with these conflicts and their consequences.

Similarly, the nature of African post-colonial politics as portrayed in the play is something not strange to an African reader. Tribalism is such a strong force in

independent African states that many of them have been crippled by it. Wars have been fought and coups launched on no other ground other than tribe.

### **3.2 Structure and Plot**

The structure and plot of *The Black Hermit* are characteristic of what one finds in contemporary African plays; they follow western conventions. There is no attempt on the part of the author to experiment with the structure and plot. The plot follows the traditional western convention of rising action, climax, falling action and resolution.

### **3.3 Characterisation**

There is no doubting the fact that the characters in the play are Africans living in an African setting. Their experiences, practices and customs are largely African, except for those in the city who have adopted western ways of life. Even then, the characters demonstrate the fact that they are Africans trying to grapple with the western cultural influences. Most of the characters in the play can only make sense in an African context or setting.

### **3.4 Language**

Unlike Aidoo, Kasoma and Kani, Ngugi, in *The Black Hermit*, does not resort to the use of any words from an African language in the dialogue or the stage directions. The play is written entirely in English. However, it is still possible to see that the African characters, especially those in the village, speak like Africans, as contrasted to those in the city. It is clear that, since they do not speak English, their utterances are a mere English version of what they say in the local language.

The language is a direct translation of what the characters would have been saying in the Marua language, in the same way that the language used by the African characters of Achebe's novel *Things Fall Apart* is a direct translation of what the characters would be saying in the Igbl language. The dialogue also reflects traditional African cultural beliefs, such as when Nyobi says, 'A woman without a child is not a woman.'

## 4.0 Reading the Signs

### 4.1 Hermit

The title, 'The Black Hermit', contains the central metaphor of the play. In other words, the entire play hinges on the idea that Remi, the protagonist, is a hermit; more than that, a 'black' or African one. The cultural conflicts in the play arise mainly because of Remi's 'hermit' status. A hermit is an individual who lives in isolation, usually for religious reasons. He separates himself from the society in order to dedicate himself to his cause. In the religious context, especially in Christianity, hermits would live in hermitages built either in the forest or the desert. Hence a hermit is etymologically linked to a desert-dweller (Skeat 2007: 212).

Remi, however, is a different type of hermit. This is how he describes his concept of hermit (44):

I have been too long a hermit  
In the City.  
I'd thought I'd escape  
From things that were me –  
That were part of my life.

Thus, while the classic hermit kept away from society and chose to live in isolation in the desert or forest, Remi's 'hermitage' is the city. The reason for his being a hermit is not because he would like to dedicate himself to a particular cause. In fact, he runs away from the cause of his tribe, which he does not agree with. In addition, while the model hermit usually lived in isolation in order to deepen his Christianity, Remi lives in isolation partly in order to detach himself from Christianity. While the model hermit sought to distance himself from the cares of the world, Remi plunges into the dens of sin on offer in the city, such as night-clubs, as his dialogue with Jane, his white girlfriend in the city, reveals (46):

*REMI: My tribe calls. I no longer want to be a hermit in the city.*

*JANE: A hermit?*

*REMI: I came here in search of solitude.*

*JANE: In night-clubs and wild parties?*

*REMI: Seclusion from what was formerly around you is solitude. To be a hermit means escaping from what's around you. My tribe was around me.*

Thus, whereas the religious hermit sought truth and a deeper relationship with God, Remi seeks to disconnect himself from his old life of commitment to God and family. Hence Jane says to him (52), 'You call yourself a hermit. A *black hermit*. You are not a hermit. A hermit looks for the truth. You ran away from the truth of your position' (emphasis mine). The greatest irony in Remi's life, however, is not that he is a hermit in the city, but that he is a *black hermit*. In other words, from a cultural point of view, the term 'black hermit' is a paradox. However, it in effect signifies Remi's paradoxical life and inner cultural conflict.

In other words, it is against Remi's African culture and upbringing to live in isolation or to distance oneself from the tribe or family. It goes against the custom of communality and importance of family. As an African he is expected to maintain his links to family and tribe, for indeed that is what the cultural environment expects of him. Yet the very first image we see of Remi is that of a man living in solitude. At the beginning of Act Two, Scene One, we see Remi alone in his room, 'lying on a sofa' (23). The stage directions at the beginning of Act Two, Scene Two, paint a more vivid picture of his solitude (27): 'Remi is *alone* reading a Sunday newspaper' (my emphasis).

In explaining the reasons for his abandonment of the village, the tribe, church, wife, family and home, Remi says to Omenge: 'I wanted to be myself' (32). Ironically, however, he is what he is because of his family and tribe, who raised him. The tribe treated him as their son and invested in his education with a view to having him come back to help them. As the first man of the Marua tribe to go to university, he raised their hopes. One of the elders says of the hopes the tribe had when raising Remi (11):

The tribe had first to tend a plant,  
A green plant in their midst.  
The green life would lead us to power and glory.

The tribe, therefore, expected a return on their investment – in the form of Remi forming a political party aimed at benefiting the Marua. The tribal elders have a sense of entitlement to the benefits of Remi’s educational attainments. Thus they are deeply disappointed when, instead of fulfilling their wishes, he chooses to abandon them for the city. Remi himself acknowledges the role of the tribe in his development when he says to Jane, ‘The tribe had reared me. Given me education’ (52).

One of the elders expresses the tribe’s disappointment to Nyobi, Remi’s mother (8):

We knew him once for a good son.  
He acceded to our wishes  
And married this woman,  
A daughter of the tribe,  
Instead of going to a white-skinned woman.  
We were happy.  
Remi was not the husband of Thoni, alone.  
*Remi was also the new husband to the tribe.*  
Through his big education,  
He would have bound us together.  
He should have formed a political party,  
And led us to victory.  
But we, like you, were puzzled.  
Why did he go away from us?  
*Is that natural?*  
We, *the ridge*, the tribe, have waited.  
We fear. (my emphasis)

In the tribal spirit of communality, Remi is ‘married’ to the tribe. The tribe, like Thoni, is also his ‘wife’, and he is expected to have a productive relationship with it. The fruit of this marriage must not only be seen, but enjoyed by the tribe. Similarly, the fruit of his education must not only be enjoyed by him alone, but by the tribe, to which he belongs, and which is proud of his educational achievements. The elder makes this point clear to Nyobi (9):

Remi, your son and ours,  
Is the only educated man in all the land,  
Exceeding in knowledge all the people,  
Black and white put together.

It is therefore a taboo for Remi to distance himself from the tribe; it amounts to 'divorce'. Hence the elder's question, 'Is that natural?' In the Marua ethos, it is not natural to place personal interests above tribal interests, especially after being helped by the tribe. The tribe is superior to the individual. Thus the elder refers to the tribe as 'the ridge', a metaphor which, culturally, emphasises the superiority and centrality of the tribe in the Marua ethos. The tribe is the prominent part of the Marua cultural landscape. From a cultural perspective, therefore, Remi lives in an inverted world where the individual is the ridge; where individualism is more important than communalism; where voluntary isolation reigns over the concept of family and community. An inverted world cannot therefore be natural.

Remi's world is also inverted in the religious sense. Having been brought up a Christian, he was taught to put God first and to obey him. Yet he now lives in a God-less world where he only obeys his own voice. The Pastor paints a gloomy picture of Remi's spiritual deterioration when he says to Nyobi (21):

I'll open my mind to you.  
Your son went away,  
Was lured by Satan into the City.  
At college, he became wayward,  
Digressed from the paths of holiness.  
God wanted him for a sower of Christ's seeds.  
Why else did God give him that education?  
To lead many a lost sheep,  
Back to Christ, his master. But  
Remi refused to go to Nineveh,  
He fled to the City of idolatry.

It is worth noting that the Pastor makes a biblical allusion to Jonah, who, after being commanded by God to go and preach to the people of Nineveh, disobeys and instead gets on a ship to Tarshish (Jonah 1). As far as the Pastor is concerned, Remi is ungrateful to God, who has given him an education and made him what he is. Remi, in other words, places his personal interests above the interests of God.

The Pastor's reference to the city as the 'City of idolatry' implies that Remi has exchanged the God of his childhood with 'idols'. He now worships the god of pleasure and self-gratification by frequenting night-clubs with Jane. Yet the Bible says, 'Thou shalt have no other gods before me' (Exodus 20: 3). In Remi's inverted world, the god of pleasure is raised above the God of his Pastor. Furthermore, in Remi's inverted world, personal interests are above family interests. Hence he feels justified to abandon, not only his mother, but also his wife, Thoni. In Nyobi's view, the 'unnaturalness' of Remi's behaviour is tantamount to death (7):

And now, Remi,  
The only man left to head this house,  
Went and died to us in the city.

Remi, therefore, like Ato in *The Dilemma of a Ghost*, is a 'ghost' of his former self. Spiritually, tribally and culturally Remi is dead. Hence he is caught up in a three-headed conflict: with the Pastor, his family (Nyobi and Thoni), and the tribe. Each one wants to 'resurrect' him for their own gain.

Ultimately, however, it is Remi's past, with its tribal and religious beliefs, that wants to claim him. Not only does Remi want to keep away from his past, he wants to erase it as well. He tries to reinvent himself, but, as it turns out, the new Remi lacks substance, is only a 'ghost'. The new Remi represents failed manhood – for he has abandoned his manly responsibilities in the village; he has run away from being head of the family.

However, as Remi discovers, the past will not let go of him because it remains a part of him. It haunts him, as the following dialogue with Jane reveals (24):

*JANE: Imagine you saying you are tired. It's enough to make anyone split their sides.*

*REMI: No, seriously, I'm tired.*

*JANE: Would you have said that last year? You went from night-club to night-club as if you were haunted, running away from something.*

*REMI: Jane!*

*JANE: Yes?*

*REMI: You must not say that.*

*JANE: Why?*

*REMI: Perhaps, well, perhaps I was haunted.*

*JANE: What do you mean?*

*REMI: Oh nothing.*

Remi's past finally catches up with him when the elders of the tribe and the Pastor decide to follow him to the city in separate attempts to convince him to return to the village. While the tribe wants him to return to lead them to ascendancy over the other tribes, the Pastor wants him back for religious reasons – to return, like Jonah, to the work of preaching to Nineveh.

Unable to continue running away from his past, Remi agrees to return to the village, but not to please the tribe, family or Pastor (44-5):

I have been too long a hermit  
In the City.  
I'd thought I'd escape  
From things that were me –  
That were part of my life.  
I must now rise and go to the country.  
For I must serve our people,  
Save them from traditions and bad customs,  
Free them from tribal manacles.

Remi's triumphant return, therefore, turns into an anticlimax because, while he manages to make it clear he will not be anyone's puppet, he drives Thoni into committing suicide.

He realises, too late, that although he inherited her from his late brother, Thoni actually loved him. Being rejected by him causes her to commit suicide.

## 4.2 Other Characters

### (a) *Thoni*

Thoni's death is tragic, and therefore painful to Remi, because she faithfully waits for him to return from the city, even when Nyobi urges her to find another man who would be ready to raise a family with her (4):

I hate to see your youth wearing away,  
Falling into bits like a cloth long hung in the sun!  
Go and get another husband.  
The world will not wait for you.  
I tell you take a man.  
If he does not marry you,  
He may at least give you a child.

Thoni signifies failed womanhood especially because she has not graduated to motherhood in a culture where having a child is paramount, as reflected in Nyobi's words, 'A woman without a child is not a woman.' If Nyobi's sentiments are anything to go by, a woman needs a child, even if the child is born out of the marriage home. ('If he does not marry you, He may at least give you a child.')

However, Thoni can only have a child through Remi, the man she is, from the cultural point of view, legitimately married to. The fact that he has chosen to be a hermit means she cannot have a child with him. Thus, as Remi's mother, Nyobi feels vicariously responsible for Thoni's predicament. She therefore feels her daughter-in-law's maidenhood is being wasted – that is, it is not being turned into motherhood. She says to Thoni, 'Am pained to see the gradual waste of your maidenhood' (2).

There is reason to argue that Thoni is also a signification of the culture and customs which Remi rejects but realises he still needs. In other words, her relationship with Remi signifies his broader relationship to the tribe. Hence his wholesale rejection of Thoni and

the tribe backfires on him. While he is right to reject tribalism and the wrong customs of his people, he is wrong to reject everything about his culture and family. Hence he pays a heavy price in the form of Thoni's suicide. Ironically, it is elders and women of the village, who represent Marua culture, who come to his rescue when Thoni dies. Ignoring Remi's rejection of the tribe, the villagers ceremoniously and dutifully carry Thoni's corpse on a stretcher and bring it to him (75). Thoni, in life, is very hardworking and faithful to her absentee husband, yet her womanhood is brought into question, just like Eulalie's in *The Dilemma of a Ghost*, because of the lack of a child. The only difference between the two is that, while Eulalie is childless by choice, Thoni by default. Thoni, therefore, dies without a fulfilled womanhood.

(b) *Jane*

While Thoni represents the past which Remi initially attempts to erase, Jane represents the city life which he embraces and idolises. While Thoni complains of being lonely and abandoned by Remi, Jane has access to him. When he tries to decline going to the night club with her, she manages to convince him to go. 'You're so sweet,' she says, as they embrace (27). It would be possible to assume that, read as a sign, the embrace signifies Remi's embrace of the idols of the city at the expense of his culture as symbolised by Thoni. The only way Remi can successfully return to the land of his birth, therefore, is by first disentangling himself from Jane. This is what he does by, first, revealing to her that he in fact has a wife back at the village (50), and, second, letting Jane go (53).

(c) *Nyobi*

Nyobi, being advanced in age, plays a matriarchal role in the play. However, there is reason to argue that she signifies unfulfilled matriarchy because of the absence of her son who, in a normal situation, would give her grandchildren. She is not a happy matriarch because of Remi's neglect of Thoni – a problem she feels powerless to solve, but which she feels obligated to solve. Nyobi's matriarchal role only finds its expression in her relationship with Thoni. Thus, for example, she tries to advise and console Thoni over the pain brought about by Remi's self-imposed exile.

At the beginning of the play, Nyobi tries to comfort Thoni, who has been crying (1-2):

Aah,  
You have again been crying  
Letting the bitter water  
Tear and wear your cheeks  
To acquire a face like mine...  
I, your mother in all ways but birth  
Am pained to see the gradual waste of your maidenhood.

Nyobi recognises the fact that advanced age has given her the advantage of experience and wisdom (3):

I am an old woman.  
These eyes have seen the rain come and go,  
Have seen sunrise and sunset,  
Seasons followed by many others,  
Birth and death alternating.  
All these have taught me,  
The lot of women will never change.

Nyobi's only claim to authority is her old age, not her gender. Despite the death of her husband and older son, she cannot head the house. Only a man can assume the role, in this case Remi who, however, is not willing. Thus her complaint (7):

The only man left to head this house  
Went and died to us in the city.

The Marua are a patriarchal society, like the Fanti in *The Dilemma of a Ghost*, and power is the preserve of men. Thus, the elders play a patriarchal role of leading the tribe, much like Petu does in *The Dilemma of a Ghost*. The patriarchs, however, recognise Nyobi's matriarchal role. Hence they seek her support and blessing when they decide to send some elders to the city to convince Remi to return (11-2):

*ELDER:        Remi, Remi.*  
*We must fetch him from the city.*  
*We thought you had a message for him.*

*NYOBI: Tell him,  
 His wife and mother want him back.  
 Oh, Elder,  
 If you can make him –*

*ELDER: Trust Marua medicine to do its work.*

*NYOBI: I – I do.*

*ELDER: And –*

*NYOBI: Yes.*

*ELDER: There is something else.  
 We wanted you  
 To give our messengers and their medicine,  
 A mother's blessings,  
 To attend them on this difficult journey.*

*NYOBI: With all my heart.  
 Go in peace, and success attend you.*

The fact that the elders seek Nyobi's blessing on the mission does not mean she has power in the tribe. She is downtrodden, like all other women of the tribe, as she herself acknowledges in her dialogue with Thoni (3-4):

The lot of women will never change.  
 For you and me, Anjiru, Njene, Wihaki,  
 Independence has no meaning  
 Other than the one I knew yesterday:  
 I have tasted the pains of beating,  
 The pangs of birth and death's blows.  
 One lesson only have I learnt:  
 A woman's joy is scolding her children.  
 It lies in seeing their smiles and cries,  
 Doing little things for them, the loved ones.  
 A woman without a child is not a woman.  
 But I've also learnt that

To be kicked and humiliated follows this joy  
When the children grow.

Despite approaching Nyobi for the blessing, the elders still see her only as an extension of, or an appendage to, the life of her dead husband, Ngome. The elder's words to Nyobi illustrate this (7):

Thank you wife of Ngome,  
May God guard his spirit.  
He was a man, oh yes your husband was,  
Before the white-man stole his heart  
And turned him into a Christian.  
The Gods themselves are jealous,  
They only take away the choicest in the land,  
Leaving the weak and the feeble.

In other words, Nyobi, at the end of the day, is only 'the wife of Ngome'. She has no character of her own except in relation to her husband, despite the fact that he is dead. In other words, womanhood is linked to having a husband and ultimately becoming a mother. A woman, to be complete, needs a man, because, as Nyobi says, a woman without children is not a woman. How else does she fulfill her role as a mother if she has no husband.

Thoni's complaint is very revealing (3):

Yet I can't do without a husband,  
Without a man to warm my bed,  
A man to ask me for a meal in the evening,  
A man to make me wash his clothes;  
And a child of my own,  
A child to call me mother,  
To make me feel a new self.

It is for this reason that Remi is blamed for Thoni's 'wasted maidenhood'. How can she become a mother without him making it possible?

The Pastor also recognises Nyobi's matriarchal role in her family. However, he would like her to use that role to convert Thoni to Christianity. Nyobi, on the other hand, feels duty-bound to ensure Thoni has a husband and is happy (19-20):

*NYOBI: I want him back, Pastor.*

*Remi left a young wife.*

*And she, like a sapling in a drought-stricken land,*

*Will also dry up in the heat of desolation.*

*PASTOR: You must not think about the flesh.*

*NYOBI: She is young.*

*(Pastor starts to move away. She runs after him calling, 'Pastor, Pastor')*

*NYOBI: She is a seedling*

*Whose eventual fruit*

*Will be a blessing to us all.*

*But a seedling needs a gardener.*

*PASTOR: Nyobi.*

*NYOBI: Yes.*

*PASTOR: You love Christ?*

*NYOBI: Yes.*

*PASTOR: Know you not what Christ has done for you?*

*Though your husband was called,*

*And also, your first son,*

*God has given you that child*

*So you may lead her to the cross.*

*Salvation is not achieved through the flesh.*

As far as Nyobi is concerned, only the return of Remi matters. Everything else is secondary. She reasons that Thoni does not need the gospel of salvation more than her husband Remi. Once he returns, from her perspective, every other problem will be solved. Thus she is hurting because she cannot bring Remi back, and her hope is rekindled when the elders and the Pastor go to the city to try and bring Remi back. What

hurts Nyobi most, however, is that her son no longer recognises her authority as a mother – contrary to tradition. He denies her the opportunity to consummate her matriarchal role. It is taboo for Remi to defy or disrespect his own mother. She bemoans her situation (2):

This world is really bad  
Not the same as the old  
When sons still gave respect to parents,  
Honouring claims of motherhood,  
Harkening to the call of blood and soil.  
Many letters have we now sent to him,  
But no reply,  
Not a word from him, a child I bore,  
And like a plant in the field  
Tended carefully,  
Anxiously watching the sun, the wind and the rain,  
That no malicious weather should come to harm him.

Nyobi, therefore, is like Thoni in one respect: they are both unfulfilled women. While Nyobi cannot consummate her matriarchal role, Thoni cannot consummate her marriage to Remi. Both women need Remi, a man, to become fulfilled women. Hence his decision to become a hermit and abandon his family is the fulcrum of much of the play's conflicts. From the perspective of Marua tradition, however, Remi is also an unfulfilled man. His real manhood can only be consummated upon returning to the tribe and its traditions, as he is a 'son of the soil' and one of the tribe's 'skin and blood' (37).

A real man is one who adheres to and defends the traditions and customs of the Marua. According to the elder sent to seek Nyobi's blessing, for example, Ngome, Remi's father, lost his standing as a man when he converted to Christianity (7):

Thank you wife of Ngome,  
May God guard his spirit.  
He was a man, oh yes your husband was,  
Before the white-man stole his heart.

In other words, the moment Ngome became a Christian, the tribe lost him. Similarly, Remi, who had earlier converted to Christianity, also loses his standing as a man. The situation is worsened by his decision to abandon the tribe. The elders, therefore, are determined to restore Remi by bringing him back to the tribe. He would then fulfil his tribal and family roles, and in so doing help his mother and wife consummate their lives. Nyobi desperately needs Remi, as does Thoni.

(d) *Elders*

The elders, who are all male and run the affairs of the tribe, can be said to signify Marua culture. They are the defenders and key advocates of the tribe's customs and traditions. They are the patriarchs who hold the power; hence Remi refers to them as 'Fathers of the tribe' (36). On the other hand, the elders signify tribalism, which, as in most independent African states, is a source of disunity (Davidson 1992). In their zeal to raise the profile of the tribe, they end up promoting tribal politics, which is part of the reason why Remi disconnects himself from them. Even when he returns to the village, they say to him, 'We want a tribal political party' and demand a prime minister from the tribe (39).

The elders cannot distinguish between commitment to the tribe and tribalism. They fail to realise that the new government, barely four years in power, has a bigger agenda than that of promoting the narrow interests of tribes; it now has to focus on the national agenda and promote inter-tribal harmony at national level. Hence Remi tries to enlighten them on the futility of pursuing tribal politics, as much as he tries to show them that tribal pride does not mean inflexible commitment to customs and traditions that are no longer relevant to the development of the nation. As he leaves for the village he declares (45):

I must now rise and go to the country.  
For I must serve our people,  
Save them from traditions and bad customs,  
Free them from tribal manacles.

When Remi arrives at the village, he proceeds to address the villagers. What he says is contrary to the expectations of the elders. One of the villagers describes what transpires thus (62-3):

His voice. He was angry.  
He was not alone.  
He was with a man from another tribe.  
He made him stand on the platform,  
And linking hands with him, said:  
This is a man from Njobe tribe.  
He is my brother and yours.  
You should have been there,  
How he blamed the elders,  
The Leader and the others,  
For preaching tribalism,  
Misleading us all.  
Our salvation lay in the National Party.  
People were then quiet.  
Some turned their heads away  
Stung by his wrathful words.  
Other elders went away in guilt and shame.

(e) *Pastor*

It would be possible to assume that the Pastor signifies the Christian faith which, from the elders' point of view, has divided the Marua by turning some of them against the tribe's traditions and customs. He represents the kind of religious zeal that overemphasises the spiritual life at the expense of the people's physical needs. Thus, for example, the Pastor is only concerned about Thoni's spiritual state, not her marital status. Remi no longer finds solace in the Pastor's brand of religion, and equates Christianity to the superstitions of the tribe. Hence Remi disappoints the Pastor just as much as he does the elders. The Pastor is in conflict with the elders as both parties fight for the souls of the Marua people,

as well as for Remi's support and endorsement. Both parties attempt to woo Remi for selfish, parochial reasons. They want him back to promote their interests, not his.

(f) *Omange*

Omange could be said to signify the concept of non-tribal nation-building. Despite being from the Njobe tribe, he is a close friend of Remi's. While Remi refuses Jane's request to take her with him to the village, he however takes Omange along with him. Omange stands beside Remi as the former hermit delivers his speech to the shell-shocked villagers. In fact, as earlier shown in the villager's description of what transpires at the meeting, Remi makes Omange stand on the platform, links hands with him and tells the people Omange is their brother (62).

### **4.3 Setting**

(a) The Country Versus the City

The action of the play starts in the country (village), shifts to the city, and back to the country. The contrast between the two settings to a large extent reflects the contrast of opinions and lifestyles that is at the heart of the play's conflicts. The country represents the traditional lifestyle and culture while the city represents the new western lifestyle. The life in the country is symbolised by the hut in which Nyobi and Thoni live, whereas Remi's apartment symbolises life in the city.

(i) *Family/Communality and Individuality*

The hut is associated with the history and continuity of Remi's family, in the same way as the Odumna clan house in *The Dilemma of a Ghost* and the Makhaya house in *Nothing but the Truth*. On the other hand, Remi's apartment is associated with individualism and isolation from family. It has not association with the history of Remi's family. Nyobi continues to live with Thoni and to care for her even in the absence of Remi. This is because the concept of family, in the Marua ethos, demands that Nyobi looks after Thoni, who is, like Remi, her 'child' (5). To Thoni, Nyobi is 'mother' (5). Thoni is a daughter of the tribe in the same way that Remi is a son of the tribe. The parents of the tribe are his

mothers and fathers. Thus, when the elders meet Remi, they utter statements such as, 'Fathers need you at home' and 'mothers cry for you' (39).

It is also significant that Thoni chooses to live with Nyobi. Apart from the fact that she is waiting for Remi to return, she considers Nyobi her mother and therefore part of her family. She feels duty-bound to stay with Nyobi, who is now advanced in age, and take care of her. Thus, at the very start of the play we see Thoni preparing food for the two of them to eat. Thoni's decision to stay with Nyobi stands in sharp contrast to Remi's decision to become a hermit in the city. While Thoni honours and respects Nyobi, Remi, who is Nyobi's biological son, neglects his mother. Thus, when the Pastor meets Remi in the city, he reminds him of his duty to family (42):

*PASTOR: We need you. No, God needs you.*

*REMI: Even you, Pastor? You want a political party?*

*PASTOR: Not so, my child.*

*Your mother needs you.*

*REMI: She has no needs.*

*PASTOR: She daily grows weak,*

*Do you want her to die?*

*REMI: It's her own affair.*

*PASTOR: Remember that*

*She gave birth to you.*

*REMI: Yes – she's my mother.*

*PASTOR: She gave you milk when*

*You were young and weak*

*Not knowing yourself.*

*REMI: (Silent)*

*PASTOR: Save her.*

In the Marua tradition, family extends beyond biological mother and father. Remi's neglect of the tribe is as serious as his neglect of wife and mother. Thus, the Pastor reminds him (43):

Your learning is not your learning  
It's for all the people.

(ii) *Womanhood and Manhood*

The very opening scene of the play reflects the nature of womanhood in the Marua culture. This is the description of Scene One: 'A hut in the country. Thoni kneels on the floor near the hearth, sorting out beans spread in a basin. Enter Nyobi, a middle-aged woman, carrying a water-barrel which she puts down in a corner.' The image of Thoni kneeling 'on the floor' signifies the tough life of the village woman – the life by which part of the worth of a woman is judged. It is the picture of a hardworking woman, reminiscent of the two village women in *The Dilemma of a Ghost*.

The hearth is another important signifier in the opening scene. It consolidates the image of the hardworking woman. The hearth implies that the women have to fetch firewood from the forest in order to prepare food and water for bathing. Firewood, as in *The Dilemma of a Ghost*, reflects not only the toughness of village life, but also of the village woman. It could be argued that, as a sign-vehicle, firewood plays the same role as water, which is also central to the life of the village woman in *The Black Hermit* as in *The Dilemma of a Ghost*. In the stage directions we read that, while Thoni sorts out the beans in a kneeling position, Nyobi enters carrying a water-barrel which she places in a corner. The water-barrel carries the same semiotic meaning as the firewood or hearth because the women need to make trips to the river to collect water for domestic use. Remi consolidates this image when he describes his mother thus (25): 'She is old, goes to the river for water, to the forest for firewood...' Again this draws a similarity with the life of the village woman in *The Dilemma of a Ghost*.

The hearth could also be said to signify life, and its absence in Remi's apartment signifies the absence of 'life'. The hearth symbolises the very life of the family, for it feeds the family and keeps it alive. Hence Nyobi says to Remi (65):

My son, don't be dazzled by the blaze  
Which will burn for a night and tomorrow it is out,

All ashes and blackness,  
Look to your House:  
And there you will see the fire that glows all night  
And day, between three hearthstones.  
There is food and the warmth of life waiting for you.

The hut, on the other hand, consolidates the picture of unconsummated womanhood. It is occupied only by women – Nyobi and Thoni. Remi is missing from the picture. Therefore, the hut lacks the leadership of a man. On the other hand, Remi’s apartment in the city is a reminder of his incompleteness as a man. He has a wife whom he has abandoned. The irony is that Thoni, who should be living with him, instead stays with Nyobi.

The absence of a husband, according to Thoni, has brought ‘gloom and loneliness’ to the hut (5). According to Nyobi, however, the absence of a male figure in the hut makes her fear it might be cursed (7). She recounts that all the men that should have headed the family have perished. First it was her husband Ngome, then her eldest son, who had married Thoni, and now Remi has abandoned the homestead. She pours out her heart to the elder (7):

My heart is still heavy with grief.  
I long ago feared that someone had put a curse on this house.  
My first son, so big and strong,  
Was taken from me, like that,  
For no reason that a man could divine.  
And not a year had passed  
Since he brought us joy  
By marrying a young girl,  
The best in the land.  
Our tears had hardly dried  
Before my man follows.  
And now, Remi,  
The only man left to head this house,

Went and died to us in the city.

(iii) *Old Order and New Order*

It would appear that, while the hut represents the old order with its simplicity of life, the city represents the new, sophisticated western lifestyle which is, in effect, a corruption of the old. Hence the city is the 'City of idolatry' (21). The 'idolatry' includes the pleasures of the city as well as all forms of corrupt behaviour. In other words, the evils of the city include both moral and political corruption. The night clubs signify the moral corruption. Remi complains to Jane about the corruption of government ministers and their permanent secretaries, who he says 'fatten on bribes and inflated salaries' (27).

The hut is Remi's real home, not the city, in the same way that the Odumna clan house is Ato's real home, not the city. It represents the soil or land from which Remi originated (37). Jane, who grew up in South Africa, understands the African concept of home. She knows that Remi's 'home' is not the city but the village where his mother is. She urges him to go home with her and become a teacher (26), a suggestion which he turns down as he cannot assure her of marriage. Similarly, Omange, Remi's friend and confidante, urges him to return 'home' (35): 'Remi, I think you better give up a mere clerk's job in an oil-company. Go home.'

The hut could be said to represent what Remi fears – the old life with its taboos, customs and traditions. It is worth noting, in fact, that when he does return to the village, his first stop is not the hut, but the meeting grounds in the village, where he addresses a meeting of the villagers. This implies that he still dislikes the hut and what it stands for – but it is the ultimate insult to his family, particularly his mother and wife, who, in anticipation of his 'return', even tidy the hut (54).

#### **4.4 Properties**

Some of the properties in the play are signs which reinforce other signs. Apart from the water-barrel, which has already been discussed, there are other props which have

significance as signifiers, particularly the letter Thoni writes to Remi, the Bible and the bundle of traditional medicine left at Remi's apartment.

(a) *Letter*

In the play's closing scene, Act Three, Scene Three, a village woman hands Remi a letter from Thoni. As it turns out, the letter is a farewell message – for Thoni commits suicide. At the semiotic level, the letter signifies, in part, Thoni's rejection by Remi. By extension it signifies his rejection of the Marua traditions which forced him to marry Thoni. On the other hand the letter signifies Thoni's unfulfilled womanhood and unconsummated hope. Having waited for Remi for years on end, she finds herself on the losing end, with nothing to show for her years of faithfulness and patient waiting. On the other hand the letter also signifies Remi's failure to fulfill his duties as expected and demanded by tribal custom. It is a vivid reminder of Remi's guilt in two senses. First, because of his failure to take care of Thoni. Second, because of his public rejection of her, forcing her to despair and commit suicide. Clearly, had he shown her love upon his return, she would not have taken her own life.

The village woman who delivers the letter, in fact, blames Remi for Thoni's death (71):

She who was kind.  
She who was true.  
A tender sapling growing straight  
Though surrounded with weed...  
You are a leader!  
Our leader indeed.  
Know you not what you have done?  
Flung insults at your own tribe,  
Trampled mercilessly on wives everywhere?  
You may praise yourself  
(How you have succeeded at politics)  
What of here?  
What have you done to the lives of many?

To the hearts of many a man  
Who looked up to you for guidance?

Remi also blames himself for the suicide. When Thoni's body is brought to him by the elders and the women, he kneels, a broken man, and utters what amounts to a confession (76):

And she is gone now,  
Gone from me and my heart,  
Dear Remi – I loved you all my life.  
Oh, what have I done.  
Thoni, what have I done?  
I wish you had sent the letter earlier.  
But I never gave you a chance,  
Nor even tried to understand you.  
I came back to break Tribe and Custom,  
Instead, I've broken you and me.

(b) *Bible and Bundle of Medicine*

In Act Two, Scene Two, Remi is visited in his apartment by the elders and the Pastor in turn. As the elders leave Remi's home, they leave behind a small bundle of traditional medicine wrapped in banana leaves. This is the medicine given to them by the tribe's diviner to make Remi return to the tribe. The bundle therefore signifies the tribe's traditions and customs which Remi has rejected and run away from. The elders are aware of this, hence they do not formally hand the parcel to Remi. Instead, one of them 'drops' it (41).

Soon after the elders leave, the Pastor visits Remi. As he departs he also leaves behind a Bible. Although he does not drop the Bible stealthily like the elders, the Pastor does not formally hand the Bible to Remi either. The Bible signifies the past religious life which Remi has abandoned and which is beckoning to him again. At some point, therefore, the two objects are in Remi's presence at the same time. Together they represent the opposing forces that are competing for Remi's attention. As the scene comes to an end,

however, Remi, alone in his apartment, sees the two objects. 'He weighs them in both hands' (45). The act of weighing the two objects in his hand represents his dilemma: should he go with the tribe or with the Pastor? Should he go with the traditions or with religion? After weighing the two objects, however, Remi sees them as 'pieces of superstition' (45). He does not see the difference between the two, and therefore rejects both. Hence, when he returns to the village, he neither honours the wish of the tribe nor of the Pastor. He disappoints their expectations; but he also disappoints the expectations of his own mother and wife. He refuses to be led by anyone.

Remi, who had been too cowardly to stand up to his tribe, mother and Pastor (and thus chose to escape to the city), now unambiguously declares: 'I will no longer be led by woman, priest or tribe. I will crush tribalism beneath my feet, and all the shackles of custom. I was wrong to marry her who was another's wife, a woman who did not love me' (65).

#### **4.5 Other Signs**

##### **(a) Body Language**

In the African tradition, the young are expected to show respect to the elderly both in the way they talk to them and in the manner in which they behave in their presence. Generally, for example, a younger person is not expected to stare into the eyes of an older person when talking to them as it is considered disrespectful. Thus, for example, when Ato has a confrontation with his mother in *Dilemma of a Ghost* after Eulalie disappears from home, the two look each other in the eye. However, Ato is 'forced to look down at last' (49). The fact that Ato looks down is significant because, in earlier encounters, he had dared to look his mother in the eye, signifying his disregard, not only for his mother, but also for the Fanti customs on etiquette and respect for the elderly. It is therefore interesting, in *The Black Hermit*, to see what happens when the elders meet Remi in his apartment. Not only do they remain silent upon entering the apartment, they also avoid eye contact. Since the elderly are not expected to avert their eyes in the presence of a younger person, Remi, who is well versed in the culture of the Marua, immediately

realises that there is a problem back home. In other words, the eye aversion is a sign, not of respect to him, but of bearing heavy news.

This is especially so when read in connection with the silence. Hence Remi says to them (36): ‘Is there anything the matter with the land? Or why do you wear such strain on your faces? And you drop down your heads as if something weighty sits in your hearts? You make me afraid when you turn your eyes from me so... Speak now. Your silence touches my heart. It forbodes no good.’

(b) Proxemics

It is not only eye contact, or the lack of it, that signifies the nature of a relationship between people in the African tradition. It is also the treatment of space, or proxemical considerations. In the African traditional culture, the space between a young person and an elderly one can determine the nature of their relationship, or the attitude they have toward each other. In Act One, Scene One of *The Black Hermit*, Thoni leaves the hut when the elder comes to talk to Nyobi about the plan to send emissaries to talk to Remi in the city (7). In other words Thoni’s departure is a sign of respect for the elder and Nyobi. She must keep a respectable distance away from the two in order not to be considered disrespectful. Thus, when the elder leaves Thoni returns to the hut and joins Nyobi (12). Even when she returns, as a show of respect she does not directly ask what the elder had come to discuss with her mother-in-law. Instead she asks a rhetorical question, ‘Has the elder gone?’ Nyobi, being an experienced matriarch, knows Thoni is in fact eager to know the nature of the elder’s visit, so she says, ‘They’re going to fetch him’ (12).

## 5.0 Conclusion

In this chapter we have seen how culture is related to the various semiotic elements of *The Black Hermit* in the form of actions, words, characters, and properties. We have also seen how the factors discussed in this chapter relate to those in the plays analysed in earlier chapters. This is the last of the chapters analysing dramatic texts. The next chapter constitutes the conclusion of the study.

## CHAPTER EIGHT: FINAL FINDINGS, SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

### 1.0 General Introduction

In the last chapter we analysed Ngugi's *The Black Hermit*. We were able to see that the text is related to the African experience and that it shares some common features with the other three texts in terms of structure, plot, language usage, characterisation, as well as choice and treatment of themes. This chapter summarises the findings of the study.

### 2.0 Introduction

This chapter is concerned with discussing the nature and significance of the findings of the study, especially in relation to the objectives, research questions and hypotheses which we postulated in Chapter One. The chapter seeks to demonstrate how the sign-vehicles encountered in the course of textual analysis interact with African culture. This chapter will also discuss the common semiotic features and trends of the African dramatic text.

### 3.0 The Signs of Contemporary African Drama

This study has made an attempt to argue that there is a relationship between the meaning of sign-vehicles in dramatic texts and culture emanating from the fact that the latter influences the former, regardless of whether the communication is verbal or non-verbal. The study has also attempted to argue that the contemporary African dramatic text is characterised by the use of sign-vehicles that are culture-specific and may therefore only be interpreted after due consideration of the author's cultural environment and background. This means that the texts are, in effect, bearers of the author's culture. As the text is a creation of language, it follows that language is a carrier of culture. It is our view, therefore, that the reader must have an idea of the cultural context of the text in order to reach a more valid interpretation of culture-specific signifiers.

The study has also attempted to establish the following with regard to the reading of the sign in the four texts:

(a) One sign may signify different meanings in different cultural contexts. In other words, the cultural context changes the nature of the signified. In *The Dilemma of a Ghost*, for example, Eulalie wears a sunhat in the village. While this may be a genuine attempt to protect herself from the sun, in the context of Ato's village it is interpreted as evidence that she is incapable of handling the tough life that goes with 'womanhood' as perceived by the villagers.

(b) On the other hand, some signifiers are culture-specific and may therefore only mean what they mean in the particular culture of which they are products. The word *nsaka* in Kasoma's *Black Mamba Two* (38), for example, can best be understood in the Zambian cultural context. It is a reference to the place in the village where, traditionally, men meet to discuss important issues. Goodfellow's decision to use the *nsaka* to address the villagers demonstrates not only his violation of and disregard for the sacredness of the space, but also the general failure by people from the western world to appreciate African cultural artefacts. It is important to note, however, that in modern Zambia, particularly in the urban areas, the *nsaka* has lost its traditional sacredness, and is often used merely as a meeting place.

(c) The similarities in African cultures may also mean that some signs generally signify the same thing in African societies. For example, the river and firewood in the African village context are always associated with the woman's industry. This indeed is the case in *The Black Hermit* and *The Dilemma of a Ghost*.

(d) Some sign-vehicles may be best expressed in the author's African language because of the absence of a reliable or accurate English equivalent, or because the use of the African word is more effective. This is especially so in *The Black Mamba Two*, *Nothing but the Truth* and *The Dilemma of a Ghost*. Thus, for example, *The Black Mamba Two* uses words like *machila* and *nsaka* (38), while *Nothing but the Truth* resorts to words like *phutu* and *morodu* (22) to discuss South African indigenous food. Similarly, *Dilemma of a Ghost* falls back on the Fanti word *ampesi* to describe Fanti food (5). This finding also means that English, as a tool of the contemporary African dramatist, cannot

always bear the burden and message of African culture. This explains why even Achebe, one of the best-known defenders of the use of English by African writers, often resorts to the use of Ibo words and expressions in novels such as *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God*.

#### **4.0 Dynamics of Sign Behaviour**

This study has attempted to establish that there are some general characteristics exhibited by sign behaviour in the dramatic texts analysed. The sign is semiotically very dynamic.

##### **4.1 Interpretability**

Every sign of cultural significance is culturally interpretable. In other words, there are signs that may not yield to culture-specific interpretation in the context where they appear. For example, the bicycle which Kaunda uses to climb the hill at the beginning of Scene Two of *Black Mamba Two* is not a product of African culture and may therefore not be interpreted in terms of African culture.

##### **4.2 Transformability**

Signs have the capacity to transform themselves from one form of signifier into another, depending on the (cultural) context. In other words, they have the ability to adapt, like water which takes the shape of the vessel which contains it. Thus, for example, while the Bible in the hands of the Pastor in *The Black Hermit* tells us that he is a preacher, in the hands of Remi (as he weighs it and the bundle of traditional medicine) it signifies a man in a dilemma. Similarly, the *machila* in *Black Mamba Two*, when used by a traditional African leader, is a sign of respect for the leader. However, when Goodfellow mounts the *machila*, the signification changes to one of oppression and appropriation.

##### **4.3 Complementability**

The signs have a tendency to complement each other. Thus, for example, the fact that the elders in *The Black Hermit* are custodians of the traditions of the Marua tribe is reflected in their character; the way they talk and behave. However, the verbal signs are complemented by the bundle of medicine they carry with them when they go to the city

to meet Remi. The complementary role of the bundle becomes more obvious when one of the elders drops the bundle on to the floor of Remi's apartment. They are confident that, despite Remi's apparent negative reaction to their request for him to return to the village, he will eventually budge to the power of the traditional medicine.

Similarly, Ato's schizophrenic character is evident in his actions and utterances. However, this fact is complemented by the traditional mourning cloth he wears when he attends his deceased cousin's thanksgiving service (43). The dilemma-struck ghost in the children's song further complements Ato's character as a signifier of confusion and indecision.

#### 4.4 Reinforceability

Some signifiers reinforce themselves by way of repetition. In other words, a particular signifier, with a particular signified, can repeat itself in the text to the point of gaining tropological significance. In other words, it becomes a motif, assuming that its signified remains constant. For example, in *Dilemma of a Ghost*, the song of the ghost in dilemma is repeated with the same signification. Also, the infusion of the two nosy village women into the plot of the play is repeated and thus becomes a leitmotif.

#### 4.5 Revisability

Some signifiers are used in contexts where they are followed by other signifiers which neither complement nor reinforce them, but which however enable the reader to revise the earlier assumptions about what the signifier signifies. The revision might be done several times, depending on the number of signifiers linked to the original signifier, until one arrives at the final, valid interpretation of the sign.

A good example is the urn in *Nothing but the Truth*. We are first introduced to the urn at the start of Scene Two, which reads, in part:

The same house. The lights come up slowly on the empty living room. SIPHO comes in *carrying an urn*. He *puts it down on the coffee table* and *sits down* on his chair, *eyes fixed on the urn*. THANDO enters, carrying as many suitcases and

bags as she can, followed by MANDISA, about 22 years old, well dressed, beautiful and glamorous, as one would expect from someone who grew up in London. She is carrying a fashion designer's portfolio and a bag from an airport duty free shop . (emphasis mine)

The manner of entry of the urn immediately alerts us to the fact that it must have some significance in the story, especially when we learn that Mandisa, whom Siphon and Thando had gone to pick from the airport, has arrived. In other words, when we first encounter the urn, our first question is, *What does it signify?*

It is not possible, at first glance, to make an accurate guess as to why Siphon has brought the urn, what it contains, or its cultural significance. However, we start revising our earlier thoughts, or building on them, when we read that Siphon places it on the coffee table, sits with his 'eyes fixed on the urn'. Siphon's sitting posture, with his eyes fixed on the urn, provides us with an opportunity to revise our interpretation of the significance or relevance of the urn. His body language suggests that he is bothered by the urn or, more specifically, its contents.

At this point, perhaps, we might begin to suspect the urn contains the cremated remains of Themba, Siphon's deceased brother. We further revise our interpretation after we read the dialogue that follows (13):

*THANDO: Put everything down here now.*

*MANDISA: Are you sure, Thando? I did book myself into the Garden Court Plaza Hotel.*

*THANDO: No! You are going to stay here with us. My father insists. Yes, Daddy. You have to be here until the funeral on Saturday.*

*SIPHON: The funeral! Oh, my God!! What are we going to do? What about the night vigil? Reverend Haya is coming soon to conduct a small service for the arrival of Themba's body. What body? How could you do this to me? Why didn't your mother say anything to me?*

*MANDISA: My mother wrote to you, Uncle Siphon, and you never replied. Anyway, I don't see the problem. That's what everybody does in England.*

*SIPHO: You burnt my brother.*

*MANDISA: Don't say burnt. He was cremated, and that was my mother's wish.*

*SIPHO: Your mother's wish. You burnt him to ashes.*

As we read the above dialogue, we keep negotiating our way around the verbal signifiers which eventually make it clear that the urn contains Themba's ashes. However, the cultural significance of the ashes becomes obvious when Siphso complains that Themba's body was 'burnt' instead of using the word 'cremated', which Mandisa insists on.

In other words, cremating bodies is alien to Siphso's culture. In his culture, when a person dies, especially a loved one, relatives ensure that the *body* is buried with dignity. Before the burial there has to be a funeral vigil. In this case, however, the body has already been 'burnt' to ashes, denying Siphso and his family an opportunity to conduct a funeral according to the custom.

## **5.0 Conclusion**

In this chapter we have attempted to show how the findings of the textual analyses are related to the initial objectives and hypotheses. We have also attempted to explain the characteristics of the sign-vehicles used in the four texts analysed in the study. Finally we have attempted to demonstrate that the intercourse between culture and semiotics is a critical factor in the creation and interpretation of meaning in the contemporary African dramatic text.

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